

Destroyed for Lack of Knowledge

“Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he

that keepeth the law, happy is he” (Prov. 29:18).

The two books of Chronicles are a brief resumé of God’s dealings with men from the Creation to the destruction of the Kingdom. Today we are brought to the final chapter in that history—a tragic history of wasted opportunity and unfilled expectations.

What glorious possibilities were open to Israel! —a holy nation, a chosen people, a sanctified vessel, to whom God had drawn marvelously near, and through whom He had condescended to reveal Himself to mankind.

But how miserably they failed! What prolonged distress and wretchedness could have been avoided if they had only hearkened to the gentle voice of divine instruction, speaking to them as a Father to His children. What useless sorrow, just because they would not learn!

Is it indeed true that we can only learn wisdom by the path of bitter experience?—only learn it when it is too late? Does man lack entirely the faculty of avoiding evil by timely self-discipline? Must human experience always be one endless cycle of heedless folly and hopeless regret?

Fortunately, we have the assurance that this is not the whole picture, although the broad course of Scripture and experience indicate that it is almost universally true.

But there have always been the exceptions. Our hope lies in discovering and applying that hidden source of divine power by which these exceptions succeeded in breaking the strong downward gravity of the natural, and drawing themselves upward toward God.

From both the successes of the few, and the failure of the many, we must take lessons that will enable us to succeed.

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What happened to Israel? What went wrong with their bright beginnings—their eager enthusiasm for God? ***And how could it have been avoided?*** Did they voluntarily and consciously choose the path of self-destruction, or did it overtake them without warning from behind as the accumulated consequence of deeper and deeper self-deception and neglect?

To the very last moment they did not see the blow falling. Each increasingly ominous portent of disaster found them further blinded by the perverted fleshly exhilaration of a still lower descent into abomination and rebellion against God.

If they could have seen to the end the consequences of their course—if they had fully realized what was in store—if they could have *clearly perceived things in their true light*—would they have acted differently, before it was too late? Unquestionably, unless they were entirely devoid of reason.

So, in the final analysis, the whole trouble lay in their perception. True, what led them astray were the natural motions of their flesh, but everyone has them. A man is not a helpless slave to his flesh in any respect, ***unless he chooses to be***. There is always available an inexhaustible supply of divine power, if man will only accept it to help fight himself.

But sometimes we are not very anxious to get rid of our idols, and after a few halfhearted attempts as a concession to our conscience, we find it easy to convince ourselves that it cannot be done.

The plea of weakness will not bear the light of day. *God delights to make the weak strong, if they will unreservedly give themselves to Him. Most do not really WANT to put away their enjoyable little “weaknesses.”*

The trouble with Israel lay in their perception. They could not see. Darkness enveloped them, and they stumbled on to destruction, fighting against the light, mocking the messengers of God, twisting themselves tighter and tighter in the net of their own blind obstinacy, till the wrath of God rose like a flood, and there was no remedy.

Now all this is recorded for our admonition. There is something here for us. Something we must have. Each chapter adds its particular ray to that light which alone can deliver us from the same sad end.

Israel illustrates the *almost* inevitable course—the course which can be escaped only by constant, tireless effort and application, and by being very *different from the majority*.

God only proposes to save a very small remnant of the countless millions that come and go. And God is no respecter of persons. It follows then that those whom He selects must be exceptional to a very marked degree, and they must be constantly on guard to maintain this distinction.

Of what must this necessary distinctiveness consist? Not in accomplishments, or ability, or intellectual preeminence—but just one thing: putting God *FIRST*.

Putting God first consists primarily in keeping Him constantly in the forefront of our current consciousness. Remembering and not forgetting.

Many things fill our minds and come and go as memory is provoked, but it is what occupies our heart and interest and attention that counts. What or who is it to whom our mind irresistibly turns whenever the pressure of the immediate present is relaxed? *That is the acid test of our affections*. Here we stand face to face with our real selves.

What or who occupies the secret, inner sanctum of our heart where at every opportunity we delight to retire and muse? This is where God looks in making up His jewels, and if He does not find Himself there, He passes on. We may have lots of other things laid out to show Him, but He will not be interested in them. David said—

“Thy testimonies are my delight and the rejoicing of my heart” (Psalm 119: 24).

“I have longed after Thy precepts. I have loved Thy commandments” (Psalm 119: 40).

“Thy statutes have been my songs in my pilgrimage”

(Psalm 119: 54).

“O how love I Thy law! It is my meditation all the day”

(Psalm 119: 97).

Extreme? Overstated? Too highly colored? Poetic exaggeration? Not at all, though it may seem so to the crude, common, animal outlook. Here lies the difference between death and life.

David realized what the Scriptures are—not a book of ordinances for the regulation of servants, but a divinely-provided medium of intimate communion between a Father and His children.

Many express regret that the Bible is not more simple and precise. They complain because it does not give a clear-cut, straight-forward list of just what we must and must not do, and a convenient, orderly catalog of just what we must believe.

But such people entirely miss its purpose. God has made it as little like a legal document, and as much like an affectionate personal message, as possible.

In the Old Testament, employing every shade of literary style, He tells us a story filled with vital and living characters, and in telling this story He skilfully weaves in all the lessons He wants us to learn.

In the New Testament He partly follows the same plan but much of what He has to say does not lend itself to this, so He writes us a series of very personal letters and sends them by a man who wins our heart by his simple humility and unconcealed affection. Paul does not dictate—he beseeches and entreats—pleads that he may be spared the sorrow of having to exercise his authority.

This method of presenting the Scriptures to us necessitates much application to draw out its treasures. But this is not a disadvantage. God has a reasonable right to assume that a message from Him will be eagerly received by His true children—that they will delight to dwell upon it day after day and search patiently for its hidden mysteries.

The Bible is circulated in uncounted millions. It is found everywhere—this personal message from a Father to His children. But, written as it is, there is no danger that rude and unsympathetic intruders will pry into intimacies and confidences that are not for them. To all such it is a sealed book—an incomprehensible mystery.

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Wherein did Israel fail? What lessons are we to take from their failure? They lost their grip on the one thing that could save them. It gradually and fatally seeped away all unnoticed, because they neglected it. It is so natural to say:

“How utterly depraved they were! At least we do not do *THOSE things—murder, violence, every conceivable form of wickedness! We ourselves must be doing quite well, considering how bad the flesh can be!*”

But such a view misses the point. These things did not begin in this form. They started to slip very gradually and imperceptibly.

They are recorded to show, not how good we are in comparison, but how far it is possible to go, once the foundation is undermined.

They did not realize that the only safeguard was to keep a vision of God and His law bright in the forefront of their consciousness. Lose this, and there is no solid ground left. The full descent is just a matter of time.

Hosea, in chapter 4, continues the same theme—

“*Hear the word of the Lord ye children of Israel; for the Lord hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land, because there is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land*” (v. 1).

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge”

(v. 6).

“They did not like to retain God in their knowledge: therefore He gave them over to a reprobate mind and vile affections” (Romans 1:28).

—so Paul sums it up in writing to the Romans.

They would have preferred, perhaps, just to go part way. The depths to which they ultimately descended would have appalled them at first. ***But there was no part way.*** God did not allow it. When once they had chosen forbidden fruit, God saw to it that they had their fill.

“MY PEOPLE ARE DESTROYED FOR LACK OF KNOWLEDGE.”

Transgression is just ignorance—trying to battle the inevitable—taking issue with the omnipotence of God—a persistent delusion that we are different from everyone else and that somehow we will escape the consequences of our folly.

Sin is obstinate and childish refusal to face the facts. God is the central fact of the universe. God’s will, His power, His purpose—these are the basic facts which dominate eternity. They are inescapable. Sin consists in acting in a way that ignores these facts. Sin therefore is ignorance; often wilful, intentional ignorance. Peter says of the ungodly (2 Peter 3: 5)—

“For this they are WILLINGLY ignorant of.”

To transgress divine law, we must either not know, or else not give full weight to, all the facts of the case. The cure is fuller knowledge. Paul says—

“No man ever yet hated his own flesh” (Ephesians 5: 29).

Yet sin is self-destruction. If a man holds his head under water, he will drown. He transgresses against the laws of nature, and nature is stronger than he, and he cannot escape from it.

This is far more true if he transgresses against the laws of God. He will perish. He is setting himself up against irresistible forces. He is making himself an obstacle in the way of an unalterable purpose. God has declared (Isaiah 11: 9)—

“The earth SHALL be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.”

This leaves no room for ignorance, for the purpose is that knowledge shall be universal. Knowledge is light (John 11: 9)—

“If any man walk in the day, he stumbleth not.”

Here is the safeguard: keep out in the open daylight—away from the hidden things of darkness. Keep in the safe narrow beam of revealed light, accepting it in simple faith and holding to the center of the beam.

There are always myriads of unanswered questions along the edges on either side where the light only half shines and fades off into the darkness. It is very easy to become preoccupied with these—to

spend precious time elaborating theories regarding partially-perceived shapes, or to halt stubbornly in the half light demanding answers where none are given.

“Fear God and keep His commandments” (Ecclesiastes 12: 13).

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Proverbs 1: 7).

Sin is lack of knowledge—natural darkness and ignorance—the blind groping of the thinking of the flesh.

The remedy is knowledge, divine knowledge, constantly increased by study. A gradual building up of enlightenment and education—line upon line, precept upon precept—gradually displacing the shifting chaos of ignorance and undisciplined natural feeling with a solid framework of knowledge and clear perception of eternal fact.

The textbook is the Scriptures. It has often been said by prominent men that a knowledge of the Scriptures is better than a college education—that is, even from a natural and worldly point of view and for natural ends. It gives a fuller and more rounded view of life and background of experience. But its real purpose is to prepare us—not for the pre-eminence in the life that now is—but for that which is to come; to school us in the knowledge of God; to give us a proportioned groundwork for balanced and constructive self-development.

Its peculiar suitability in this respect is occasionally brought vividly to our attention by our conversations with others who have no knowledge of it.

The average individual, for example, appears singularly ignorant of history—even of the little uncertain light on the past that secular history offers.

The reason is quite obvious—the average natural man has no incentive to investigate history. Apart from a knowledge of the plan of God, history is uninteresting, purposeless, and depressing to the mind.

The natural man, like an animal, lives within the restricted sphere of his own personal activities, absorbed in himself, ignorant and heedless of either the future or the past.

But the student of Scripture finds his view extended boundlessly in every direction. The world around him, and the long colorful cavalcade of history is invested with intense interest and purpose. He is like a man suddenly released from a dungeon and placed on a mountaintop.

The alphabet of Scriptural education is the historical detail of the Old Testament. This sketches, often in the briefest terms but always sufficiently, the general background upon which the inner significance of the play is developed.

This background is essential to a proper knowledge of the whole. Not, of course, every detail of it, but at least the general outline in its proper proportions.

We learn, and sometimes it seems that this is more important than anything else, that *there is nothing particularly unique about ourselves, our lives, our problems.*

An endless procession of humanity has preceded us. Every phase and shade of human experience and emotion has come, and gone, and come again, time without number. We are no different. We are no exception.

The rules of life and death were written long before we came. Every situation that confronts us is a well-trod path in which, of those who have passed, a few have succeeded by accepting divine guidance and the rest have failed.

And now it is our turn. The rules will not be changed on our account. We must write a record to put beside the rest. Life is complex, but the rules of life are simple—

“FEAR GOD, AND KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS.”

Not asking for special favors and consideration, just because it happens to be us, but asking instead for the wisdom and strength and courage to take our place with the rest and fill our part as it comes to us.

“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.”

The great, consuming pity was that the knowledge had been there—but it had slipped through their fingers. Gradually they forgot all about it. Once or twice they ran across it by accident, as in the days of Josiah, and there was a great scurry of self-searching for a while, but it soon slipped away again, and the old self-satisfied slumber returned.

How strenuously Paul labored against this deadly tendency to relax and fall asleep! His constant keynote is, ***“Watch and remember!”*** In the chapter read this morning (Acts 20) as he takes his leave of the brethren at Ephesus, we enter perhaps more closely into his inner feelings than anywhere else.

A man of great capabilities, signally honored in the service of God, yet appealingly simple and sincere. He was wholly unreserved and unashamed in his demonstration of affection for those whom he had begotten and labored over in the Truth, knowing as he left them that many would not be able to hold on to the end—***“Watch, and remember.”***

“Therefore WATCH, and REMEMBER, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears” (v. 31).

Remembrance—

“Have these things always in remembrance”

(2 Peter 1:15).

“Stir you up by putting you in remembrance”

(2 Peter 1:13).

“Put the brethren in remembrance of these things”

(1 Timothy 4: 6).

And the words of Jesus, the night he was betrayed—

“Do this, in remembrance of me, until I come”

(Luke. 22:19).

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