

"THE PROPHETIC SONG OF ZACHARIAS"

from

Plain Sermons
On Subjects
Practical and Prophetic

by Alexander McCaul

*"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel;
for he hath visited and redeemed his people."
Luke 1:68*

THE popular theology of the day teaches that Christ was promised to the Jewish people—that he was for centuries anxiously expected as the consolation of Israel—that the language in which the predictions of his advent were couched seemed to imply national restoration and happiness in the land of their forefathers; and yet that Christ neither was, nor was intended to be, a blessing to the Jews more than to any other people; yea, that the fact of his appearance necessarily terminated their separate existence as the people of God, and thereby made all fulfilment of their national hopes impossible: that is, that the popular theology teaches that the enunciation of the prophecies was so constructed as to excite hopes, which the reality of Christ's advent was intended to disappoint.

It cannot be denied, that when Isaiah prophesied, saying,

“Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it:”

that the letter of the prophecy naturally led the Jews to expect a restoration of the kingdom of David over the twelve tribes of Israel. It cannot be denied that when Jeremiah prophesied, saying,

“Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise up unto David a righteous Branch. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely;”

the words were exactly such as to excite the hope that the two tribes, and the ten tribes, which had suffered such calamities from foreign invaders, should, in the days of Messiah, possess the land of their forefathers in peace. It cannot be denied that when Ezekiel prophesies, saying,

“Behold I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land: and I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and David my servant shall be king over them, and they all shall have one shepherd,”

that the language is such as would lead simple people, especially Jews, to expect a national restoration to their land, and a national re-union of the long separated tribes under the sway of Messiah. And yet the popular theology tells us that the obvious sense of these passages is erroneous, and the expectations which it produced are carnal; that the true sense is that which is not obvious, and that, under the

figures of national restoration and national blessings to the tribes of Israel, the prophets announced the spiritual and eternal blessings to be conferred upon true believers. The most unthinking cannot help asking, Why, then, were not these spiritual blessings so plainly announced, that “the wayfaring men, though fools, should not err therein; and why, especially, were such figures employed as would necessarily mislead those to whom the prophecies were first given? And, further, if the obvious sense of a great portion of the Bible be erroneous, what becomes of the great Protestant doctrine, that the Bible is a safe rule of faith, and of the great Protestant principle of the duty to circulate the Bible without note and comment?

It cannot be pleaded that God condescended to Jewish prejudice, and employed these figures of national blessings, in order to lead them to true spiritual religion, because fact shews that these figures, if they did not originate, certainly confirmed, what is called a carnal expectation. It cannot be said that the straightforward preaching of spiritual religion was avoided in order not to avert them from the truth; for the simple and undisguised declaration of the Gospel could not have had a more fatal effect, than that produced by the figurative prophecies. It cannot, and will not, be urged that God was at any loss for words which should reveal his will without any ambiguity. We are at no loss to express all the spiritual blessings of the Gospel without ever alluding to the restoration of the Jews or their national prosperity.

No plausible reason can be adduced, except the will of God; and yet it sounds very harshly to say, that God fulfilled his covenant promise to Abraham to be a God to him, and his children after him, by giving them a succession of dark and ambiguous prophecies, which were difficult to understand, and which led to their temporal ruin and their eternal destruction. So dreadful a conclusion must ever prove a difficulty in the way of receiving a system to which it is necessary, and should at least lead us to inquire whether this be really the doctrine of the New Testament. If there be some plausibility in the plea, that as the Old Testament dispensation was dark and typical, its prophecies and promises partook of the same character; then let us turn to the New Testament, and consider the language in which one of its prophecies is couched, when the shadows were to flee away, and the light of the world to appear. Such an one we have in the benediction of Zacharias, and to this I would, by God's help, now direct your attention; considering,

I. THE MANNER IN WHICH IT IS TO BE INTERPRETED; and,

II. THE BLESSINGS WHICH IT ANNOUNCES.

[I.] There are two ways in which it can be interpreted; the figurative and the grammatical. The former is that adopted by one of the most popular commentators of our own times, who tell us that Zacharias is here speaking of the spiritual Israel, the true people of God, who in his commentary on the passage says,

“When Zacharias had recovered the gift of speech, he was also filled with the Holy Spirit, and uttered the following prophecy concerning the kingdom and salvation of the Messiah. His birth, character, and salvation would accomplish the predictions of the holy prophets, from the beginning of the world, all of whom, in one way or other, gave intimation of the promised Messiah; and assured the people of God, that by him they should be ‘saved from their enemies,’ and protected against all those wicked men and apostate spirits, who hated them, and sought their destruction. So that the coming of this Saviour was intended to ‘perform’ the mercy which God had been bestowing on their ancestors for ages past; and to accomplish the gracious and faithful covenant, which he had entered into with believers under all preceding dispensations—from the first promise made to fallen Adam: and which he had ratified to Abraham by a solemn oath, in behalf of himself and all his spiritual seed; the blessings of which were also shadowed

forth under external signs and advantages, secured to his natural posterity. This promise, covenant, and oath engaged to all believers deliverance from the power of Satan, sin, the world, death, and every enemy, as well as redemption from the curse of the holy law and righteous vengeance of God: that, being safe under his protection, and partakers of his mercy and grace, they might worship and serve him, as under his immediate eye, 'without fear' of being destroyed by their foes, or cast off by him, 'in all righteousness and holiness' during the remainder of their lives in this world; and so at length inherit eternal felicity in heaven."

According to this interpretation Zacharias was not speaking of his own people, nor of the redemption of Israel, but of the spiritual salvation of believers of any and every clime and nation. He seemed to speak of the Jews—he mentioned the name of Israel. His hearers' hearts were probably filled with joy at hearing the glad tidings of coming redemption; but it was all a delusion. Whatever his words might seem to imply, he was not speaking of the Jewish people at all; he was uttering a song of triumph at the approaching cessation of all the privileges which they had enjoyed for near two thousand years; he was blessing God for not visiting and redeeming the literal Israel, but for leaving them to perish in their sins.

Now if this be the sense, and this the object of the prophecy, it does seem strange, that it should have been delivered in the same dark and figurative language as the Old Testament predictions; and that the prophet who stood on the very brink of the new dispensation should be moved by the Holy Ghost to adopt the very figures which were so universally misunderstood at the time. It does seem inconceivable that, after the cessation of prophecy for five hundred years, it should be renewed in the old and antiquated form, without one beam more of light to dispel the darkness of the existing church, and without the slightest increase of facility for its being understood. The general supposition is, that, as the time advanced, the voice of prophecy became more clear and explicit: that the first promise to Adam was obscure; that that to Abraham contained more light; that to Moses and David, and the succeeding prophets, the character and offices of Christ were still more clearly revealed; until, in Isaiah, the light appeared to them in almost mid-day brightness, and those who followed all added to its intensity. In Zacharias, then, whose eyes beheld the precursor of the Saviour, and whose ears had heard that that Saviour had already a virgin mother, we might expect the veil to be almost entirely withdrawn, and the vivid rays of the morning dawn to dispel the shadows of the law; but, according to the interpretation given above, he is just as obscure, as shadowy, and enigmatical, as those who wrote in the midnight gloom of the ministration of death, and still requires the light of figurative interpretation to make his declarations intelligible.

If the Jews were in error in their exposition of the prophecies; and if, as is generally supposed, that error was to be the rock on which they were to make shipwreck of their faith and their salvation; surely we might expect that the prophet, who was the father of the Messiah's immediate precursor, would have been not only instructed to avoid that language and those figures which were the source of these errors, but also to put in a word of warning to lay open their mistake, to guard them against the consequences. Yet Zacharias uses the very same language as the preceding prophets, and has not even a distant allusion to the possibility of its being misunderstood. And not only Zacharias is silent: Zacharias' son, whose express office it was "to give knowledge of salvation unto his people," never reproved the Jews for their misinterpretation of the prophets. Yea, Christ himself, who reproved the Pharisees for their perversions of the law, never attacked the unscripturalness of their prophetic expectations, and never warned the people against that which all spiritualizing interpreters consider as the immediate cause of their ruin. He reproved his own disciples for not believing all that the prophets had spoken, but never told them that they were mistaken as to the hope of Israel which they held in common with their countrymen.

The spiritual interpretation, then, of this prophecy, would lead us to the conclusion that the merciful

God who spared not his own Son, but freely gave him for us all, not only made known the coming salvation in terms which necessarily led to error, but that he continued that mode of instruction up to the very moment of the Saviour's appearance; and, instead of using words free from ambiguity, employed the revival of prophecy to confirm them in error. The spiritual interpretation, therefore, cannot be true.

The figurative interpretation of this passage leads to hard thoughts concerning God. It also serves to fasten the charge of the abuse of words upon the Bible. A well known writer, when treating of the abuses to which human language is liable either from human infirmity or wickedness, specifies, amongst others, inconstancy in the use of words, and affected obscurity. By the former, he means using the same word in different senses; by the latter, the applying of old words to new and unusual significations. Now, if the figurative interpretation of this and similar passages be admitted, it will be exceedingly difficult to defend the Bible from the charge of being liable to the greatest defects of uninspired compositions. Zacharias begins by saying, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel:" and the word Israel occurs several times in this chapter, not now to speak of other parts of the Old and New Testaments. In the angel's words, announcing the birth of John, it is said, "Many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God." Here Israel means the Jewish people, for amongst them exclusively John exercised his ministry. In the last verse of the chapter, the evangelist says of John, "The child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the desert till the day of his shewing unto Israel." Here, again, Israel must be taken in its literal sense, and means the Jewish people. If, therefore, when Zacharias says, "Blessed he the Lord God of Israel," the same word does not mean the same thing, but stands for another complex idea, the New Testament does that which in man is looked upon as an infirmity, or a wilful deceit—it uses the same word in different senses. In like manner, if Israel does not signify the Jewish people, we have an old word applied in a new and very unusual signification. From the day that the surname Israel was conferred upon Jacob, up to the time of Zacharias, that word stood for that nation composed of his lineal descendants. There can be no question that thus it was understood and applied by the Jews.

The figurative interpretation, however, makes it necessary to believe that the prophets, and Zacharias, in the passage before us, used it in a sense in which it was utterly unintelligible, and that when employed to reveal God's will; and that they did this without giving any notice of the change of signification, so as to make it plainly impossible for the Jews to understand them. The prophets are so far from intimating that the word was to be used in a new signification of the spiritual people of God, that one of them expressly declares that Israel's old name shall be a term of reproach, and that God's new servants shall be called by a new name, saying, "Ye shall leave your name for a curse unto my chosen: for the Lord God shall slay thee, and call his servants by another name." (Isai. lxxv. 15.) The figurative interpretation, therefore, charges the Bible with the defects and imperfections of human language.

But the inconsistency of this interpretation appears not only in the arbitrary use of names; it is still more apparent in the violence which it does to the commonest word, and the unwarranted additions which it is obliged to make to the word of God. Zacharias speaks of the oaths which God swore to our father Abraham, "That he would grant unto us, that we, being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life." Now the words, "Serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness all the days of our life," plainly allude to this life, which alone is counted by days. The commentator alluded to is obliged to explain it by the remainder of our lives in this life, and eternal felicity in the world to come; because, without this, the promise, "to be delivered from our enemies," when applied to believers, could have no sense consistent with truth. In like manner, to the words "without fear," he is compelled to add, without fear of being destroyed by our foes, or cast off by God, for the same reason.

In this prophecy of Zacharias it is twice asserted "that Israel should be delivered from their enemies, and the hands of all that hate them," which certainly includes temporal as well as spiritual enemies: but no such promise is given to believers for this life. We have the promise that here we shall be delivered from the guilt and power of sin, and in the world to come we shall have deliverance from all enemies. But there is no promise that here we shall be saved from the hands of all that hate us, so as to serve him without fear all the days of our life. On the contrary, the believer's lot here is to be no better than his master's. As Christ was delivered, not from, but into, the hands of his enemies: so he says to his disciples, "They shall deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you; and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake." (Matt. xxiv. 9.) As long as we are in the flesh we must expect that the experience of every believer will be that of the Apostle's, "Without fightings, and within fears." (2 Cor. vii. 5.) The application of these words, therefore, to believers, as the spiritual Israel, is utterly contrary to truth. The history of the church and the individual believer, testifies alike, in every age, that they have not been delivered from the hands of all that hate them, and have not been permitted to serve God without fear in this world. An apparently plausible sense can only be made out by changing the plain meaning of words, and making unauthorised additions to the text; and an interpretation which requires such a procedure will hardly be received by those who have a godly fear of diminishing from, or adding to, the word of God.

But, lastly, the whole scope of the thanksgiving is opposed to the figurative, and favourable to the grammatical, interpretation. Zacharias, a Jewish priest, standing in the midst of his Jewish relations and friends, says; "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he hath visited and redeemed his people, and hath raised up a horn of salvation for us, that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us; to perform the mercy promised to our fathers—the oath which he swore to our father Abraham, that he would grant unto us, that we, being delivered out of the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear all the days of our life." What did he understand, and what did they understand by whom he was surrounded—by Israel—his people—we and our fathers? The most determinate prejudice cannot say that they understood any thing else than themselves and the Jewish people; and that they were perfectly right, appears from the following words, in which Zacharias points out that people to whom John was sent, as the people on whose behalf this thanksgiving was offered up. "And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord, to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation unto his people." The people to whom John was sent, was the Jewish people; to the Jewish people he gave knowledge of salvation, and amongst them he prepared the way of the Lord; they therefore are the people on whose behalf Zacharias says, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he hath visited and redeemed his people."

But it may be said that our church has, by putting it into our mouths in the daily service, decided against the literal interpretation, and for the application of this thanksgiving to believers. The plain answer is, that the same argument will prove that many of the Psalms did not apply to David, nor others to Christ, nor others to the Jewish church, but all to believers; that the *Magnificat* does not apply to the Virgin Mary, nor the *Nunc Dimittis* to Simeon. It is plain that these latter portions, especially, are used by the church in a secondary sense. And in this sense the thanksgiving of Zacharias, containing a song of praise for national mercies, is, for a national church, peculiarly appropriate: at the same time that the use of it reminds us of our being grafted into the stock of Israel, and teaches us to look forward with faith and prayer to the fulfilment of the predictions to the house of Israel. And this leads us to consider,

II. WHAT THESE PROMISED BLESSINGS ARE.

The first and greatest of all God's blessings to man is, unquestionably, deliverance from the guilt, and power, and consequences of sin. It is that without which all God's other gifts are vain and useless: it is not therefore forgotten in the prophecy of Zacharias, nor is it ever overlooked by those who contend

against the allegorizing perversions of the word of God. Nay, it is not overlooked nor forgotten by the most absurd of the Rabbins. Some persons represent the Jews as indulging altogether in carnal hopes, as confining their expectation of Messiah's salvation entirely to national restoration, wealth, and greatness, and expecting, as the blessings of his kingdom, nothing but the enjoyment of earthly goods. Some individuals of the Jewish nation may have said what is foolish; and it is true the hopes of the multitude are fixed upon temporal deliverance rather than upon salvation. But to make the whole nation answerable for private or popular opinions is most unjust. Amidst all their errors is found an universal expectation, that, at the coming of the Messiah, they shall be delivered both from error and sin; that they shall receive the gifts of the Holy Ghost, and never more depart from their God: and such is the hope held out in the passage before us. The grand feature of the salvation promised to Israel is, that being delivered from their enemies they should serve God without fear in holiness and righteousness all the days of their life.

Such words necessarily imply the conversion and spiritual renewal of the individuals of which the nation is composed, at the same time that they plainly express the spiritual regeneration of the whole people nationally. The New Testament prophet here teaches us to look forward to a time when conversion shall be no longer confined to the remnant, according to the election of grace; but when the Jews shall fulfil their destiny, and accomplish God's purpose which he announced in the law, when he promised that they should "be a holy nation, a peculiar people, a kingdom of priests;" which he predicted by the mouth of Isaiah, saying "Thy people shall be all righteous," which he confirmed in the words of Ezekiel, saying "Neither shall they defile themselves any more with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions: but I will save them out of all their dwelling-places where they have sinned, and will cleanse them: so shall they be my people, and I will be their God;" and which he has put beyond all doubt by the declaration of St. Paul, that "All Israel shall be saved."

But, besides this first and greatest of blessings, the Song of Zacharias expressly implies restoration to their own land. This indeed naturally follows as an inevitable consequence from national conversion. Dispersion was the national punishment for unbelief. Restoration must be the fruit of national faith. But, independently of all reasoning, the words of Zacharias imply that Israel shall yet inherit the land of their forefathers. He not only declares that they shall be delivered from the hands of all their enemies, but that God "will perform the mercy promised to their fathers, remember his holy covenant, and the oath which he sware to Abraham."

Now throughout the whole Old Testament the covenant and oath made to Abraham is connected with the possession of the land of Canaan. Thus (Gen xv. 18) it is said, "In that same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river Euphrates." Again (Gen. xvii. 7), "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee, and thy seed after thee, in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession." Again (xxii. 16), "By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord . . . that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies." Again (Exod. vi. 8), "And I will bring you in unto the land, concerning the which I did swear to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." Again (Levit. xxvi. 4-0), God promises if the Jews repent, saying, "Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob, and also my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land." Again (Ps. cv. 8), "He hath remembered his covenant for ever, the word which he commanded to a thousand generations: which covenant he made with Abraham, and his oath unto Isaac; and confirmed the same unto Jacob for a law, and to Israel for an everlasting covenant; saying, Unto thee will I give the land of Canaan, the lot of your inheritance."

These are only some of many passages which invariably connect the oath, sworn to Abraham, with the possession of the land; but they are sufficient to prove, that, when Zacharias speaks of this oath, he expressly refers to the restoration of the Jews to the land of their forefathers. This, therefore, is one of the blessings which they have still to expect. They are yet to occupy that station amongst the nations which they did of old. They are to appear in a peculiar manner as the people of God. The theocracy is to be restored, and God himself will be their King. But, important as this is to the Jews themselves, let no one think that it is unimportant to the world at large. Israel restored and glorified will constitute a nation of witnesses to testify of God's truth. Israel pardoned and sanctified shall be a national monument of God's grace and mercy to the chief of sinners. Israel, a kingdom of priests, shall be the Lord's favoured instrument to spread the knowledge of salvation to the very ends of the earth.