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THE POWER OF GOD'S WORD NEEDFUL FOR NATIONAL EDUCATION.

A SERMON,

PREACHED AT ST. JOHN'S CHAPEL,

PORTSEA,

OCTOBER 28, 1838,

BY

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PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY
W. WOODWARD, PORTSEA; AND BY MESSRS. RIVINGTON,
ST. PAUL'S CHURCH YARD, LONDON.

1838.

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TO THE MINISTER AND CONGREGATION OF

ST. JOHN'S CHAPEL, PORTSEA,

IS INSCRIBED

THIS SERMON,

PREACHED TO THEM, AND NOW AT THEIR DESIRE,

PUBLISHED FOR THE BENEFIT

OF THE

PORTSEA NATIONAL SCHOOLS.

A SERMON.

Jeremiah xxiii.—xxiv.

"Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?"

THE circumstances of Judah were new and strange when this question was put by God into the mouth of Jeremiah. False prophets who "speak their own words and prophesied out of their own mind," stood up in God's name to lead astray His people. The simple people who received these prophecies were continually mocked by their evident unrighteousness; and so the presence of the counterfeit made men suspicious of receiving the true coin. They grew to slight the very word of God, because what they had often-times received as such was found to lail; so that these "prophets of deceit caused God's people to forget His name even as their fathers forgot His name for Baal."* The name of Jehovah was now falsely used to cover those deceits for which Baal's was of old the cloak.

Against this new form of an old temptation God now warns the people. He bids them winnow the wheat and cast away the chaff, and not slight necessary truth because falsehood was abroad. "What is the chaff to the wheat?"† There are marks and qualities by which the one may be known from the other. The counterfeit cannot ape

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A SERMON, &c.

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the inner life and power of the original. "Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" Here is the mark of my true message: there is a power and might about it which cannot be caught by imitation.

The figure is easy and expressive. The custom on which it is founded still prevails in the East. In the Island of Madeira, for example, at this day, if a new road is to be carried through a set of rocky obstacles, a fire is lighted on the bed of rock; and when by its action the solid mass is charred and its cleavage loosened, the hammer of the workmen soon breaks it thoroughly away. And this same power, says God, is the true credential of my message: as "the hammer and the fire" against the rock of the wilderness, so shall be my word and my message against the stoutness of man's heart. For this is evidently the special application of the figure. Its power over the hard and corrupt nature of fallen man is the essential mark of the reality of the message—it is that which it does possess, and which is not the property of counterfeits.

In this sense evidently the "*word* of God" must not be limited to his *written word*; indeed in its first application it did not describe the written word at all: it was the living ministry of the prophet of the Lord and not the written law, which was to be discerned from all pretenders by its possession of this inner power: and it is therefore a strong and impressive assertion of this great truth, that the power of God, and that only, avails for the real subjection and renewal of man's heart—that this "fire" and that "hammer" can break it up; and that this is so exclusively their work, that the possession of this power is truly a mark and a countersign of that administration with which God is co-working.

What a multitude of truths of the very first moment for our own peace and salvation, and for that of all around us would be opened to our eyes if we did indeed but truly and practically hold this simple proposition. If we had indeed

mastered this truth and made it a part of ourselves, that amidst all the masks and frauds of this world of vanities and delusions, there is a real and effectual power working on every side of us, and which is given to work within ourselves, which can and which only can wholly beat down and destroy the evil and rebellion of our nature, and truly and in very deed renew it to its deepest foundations: if we did but receive as truth the message, "the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins."* If we did but believe that God's word, and that alone, "is like a fire, and like the hammer which breaketh the rock in pieces."

And yet, slow as we are to believe this, not merely God's word, but all experience also teaches us its truth.

Who can watch himself without seeing how far too strong evil always is and has been for his own unaided resistance? When did our best resolutions stand long before the hotness of a pressing temptation and a fitting opportunity? when did the frost-work of the morning stand before the sunshine of the noon? how often do we find old habits of sin breaking out again, when we deemed them long since quenched; shewing, like revived volcanos, that what seemed extinction was but external quietness. How continually do we see men's reason convinced that some besetting sin is bringing on them misery, whilst yet their passions carry them again and again into its meshes. How passionately do they often lament their thraldom, and yet how powerless are they to break their bonds. How many a drunkard or a gambler has vowed in an agony of earnestness to leave off his sin, and then fallen again almost as soon as he was tempted. And to take one more case how plainly do we see this in the difference there is between *reformation* and *renewal*. It not unfrequently happens that a change of circumstances will alter the whole colour of a man's conduct: the advance of years alone will do it. The thoughtless and

* Jer. xvii. 9, 10.

dissipated youth marries, settles himself in life, and becomes respectable. He has now, that is to say, few temptations to such sins as men's eyes note, or society reproves; and those around who note the change, call him a reformed character. But does it follow that he is indeed another man? alas! my brethren, no. How often do the little hints which shew what is going on within the hidden chambers of the soul, prove that after reformation there is still the same character beneath the veil of outside actions; that the sin is changed, but not the nature; that the ungodly principle is there, though it has altered its outward working, and varied with some new admixture its still poisonous streams. Little things now shew the same ruling selfish principle, the same forgetfulness of God, the same want of love to Christ which broke out of old into more unseemly, but not more real wickedness.

On the other hand, who that has noted what is passing round him has not marked some instances in which God's grace has evidently changed the heart and formed anew the spring of its affections. Common life, though it exhibit not such miraculous means, can supply us often with an end as marvellous as when Saul the Pharisee was turned into a meek and zealous follower of the Lord he persecuted. Who has not seen this heavenly power bow the swelling passions of youth to the pure and peaceable rule of a willing obedience? Who has not seen the proud made humble, the rough tempered gentle, and the indolent laborious?

How broadly too has this truth been sometimes written in the alteration of a nation's character, and its submission to the gospel yoke. Whenever the "stone cut out without hands" has indeed smitten a people or nation, how have they and all their former manners, crumbled into dust before it. The spread of Christianity in Europe after its subjection to the northern hordes remarkably attests this truth. Here we see a race of savage conquerors bow one by one to the religion of their conquered vassals: we see the conquerors

themselves subdued and leavened by it; their character changing as it possessed them, and wrought its healing work throughout these new materials; until the conquerors and conquered were welded by it into one new civilized, well ordered body. Nowhere can history match this marvellous example; because no where but in the Church of Christ was stored this living power of God's own might and presence.

Such then is the witness of experience; and right reason would lead us to expect this difference between the work of God and all inferior power. For, if the hypothesis be true; if man's nature be thoroughly corrupted to its deepest springs; how can he indeed renew himself to righteousness? That on which he has to work, and that with which he has to work are both alike defiled; how can the one cleanse the other? From the very nature of things it is impossible. "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean: not one?"* And if a man cannot cleanse himself, what created thing external to himself can hope to cleanse him? Sufferings, we see daily, cannot—death, so far as we can trace its mystery, cannot—though the outward working of the mind be modified, the spring is in truth untouched. And if these mighty powers are weak, what can be strong? What outward power can touch the secret risings of the will? None doubtless but the master's hand. The maker only can heal that which to be mended must be made anew. It is this truth which is brought out so forcibly in that magnificent petition,—"*Create* in me in a clean heart; and *renew* a right spirit within me.!"†

So evidently true to experience, and accordant with right reason is the declaration that God, and God alone, can subdue and purify the heart of man; that it is HIS word only which is "like a fire, and like a hammer to break the rock in pieces."

And yet who is there that has watched others closely, and still more himself, who does not know that one of the last and hardest things which we can do, is to bring the mind and

* Job xiv. 4. † Psalm li. 10.

soul in very deed to hold this truth? It is indeed easy to lead men so far to adopt it in theory and profession as to make it a cloak for indolence. It is easy to make men admit any thing in theory; because theory lets them live on as they would: and this is especially easy if by a perverse ingenuity they can make it a fresh excuse for sin: but nothing is harder than to bring their souls to feel deeply and habitually their own helpless corruption, and yet to labour diligently in the full living and realizing conviction that there is in the common things around them such a true presence of the unseen God, that they who will use them aright, shall find a power of God come forth from them which shall suffice to purify and change the heart. This is hard, for it is the very essence of Faith: it is that which makes the world, to any man, empty of creatures and full of God; which shews him in every thing a Saviour's reconciling blood, and the Holy Spirit's quickening power: which brings out into life and reality the apostle's declaration—"HE is not far from every one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being."*

Let us follow out in one or two particulars the effect which this belief would have upon us: and first, in its application to the object which is especially brought before you to day. You are called on to give for the support of the National Schools of this Parish; you are intreated to give liberally; more than has ever yet been raised, is wanted for their perfect support: there are the poor children of a population of 40,000 souls to be provided with instruction; and these wants cannot be easily supplied. The ground on which it is asked of *you*, is this; these children *naturally* look to you for this aid: God, that is, in His providence, has given them by the various ties of neighbourhood and society this claim on you; and they need this aid, because here they will be brought under the power of a Christian Education. The "hammer and the fire" will be raised against their hearts; these we know are the

* Acts xvii. 27, 28.

means, and the only means which can work their moral and spiritual healing. As debtors then to those around you, and as debtors above all to Christ, who pleads with you in them, we beseech you to give according to your means, yea, and above your means, to this good work.

Here in ordinary times and under common circumstances, we might leave the matter, not doubting for a moment your ready mind and will, or that you who know how freely God has given unto you, will be forward to return to him according to his gifts.

But these are not common times; and on this subject especially there is a need for speaking out boldly and distinctly to all christian men. Verily, if God's watchmen warn not, or the people will not hear, we shall here be lost. For this is a day when the counterfeit is every where abroad and when therefore we must bring out before you the real hidden difference between it and the word of God.

The turn then which infidelity now takes, is not, as once it was, directly to deny the truth of Christ's religion; or to attempt to laugh it down with ribaldry and sneers: such things would not now be borne. But though we live in a more decent age, the offence of the cross has not ceased; and perhaps infidelity may be in some respect more dangerous to us, just for this very reason, that her garb is grown more decent. A masked battery is not the least dangerous: an unsuspected enemy is not the most easily resisted. Now the peculiar address of infidelity at present is silently and decently to supersede religion—To speak of it as an excellent thing in its way: but to be always able to do without it.—To have a great respect for it, though we do not practise it, and though we feel exceedingly provoked if it meets us in business or thwarts us in pleasure or in gain, or indeed takes almost any part in life and men's affairs. It is a sort of taste in which, as in any other taste, men who have a fancy for it may be indulged by the fashionable liberality of the day, so that they do

not force it upon others, or make it disagreeably practical. Such is the infidelity of the day—it is distinct infidelity—it is as much shutting God out of His world as if we denied his being. It is the monstrous folly of confessing that He is, and treating Him as if He were not our God. This new form of infidelity might easily be traced as more or less running through society at present. But what is most to our present purpose, no where is it more plainly to be found, than in the schemes of education which we hear every day buzzed on every side of us. It is asserted, and with a painful truth, that our people are not now educated as they should be: but what remedy is set before us? A scheme of national education which more or less evidently is indeed so framed as to exclude religion. For this is the form of argument addressed to us. First it is contended that the bulk of the people must be instructed—then—that if you made as heretofore religious teaching the basis of this education, those who dissent from the particular instruction you adopt would soon withdraw their children from your schools; and then, (by a monstrous perversion of the truth) that these differences are so widely spread throughout our people, that they would in fact cause the withdrawal of the great bulk of the children whom you wish to teach; and therefore, that as teaching with religion cannot be attained, you must teach them, leaving out religion.

And is it truly come to this my brethren? Has God already visited our sinful want of union by such a clinging penetrating curse, that we must either leave our sons untaught, or teach them to be infidels? That we must either wink at the want of education, or turn to such a mad and wicked scheme? These are strong words; but not beyond the truth; for the scheme is both mad and wicked? All infidelity is mad and wicked in God's world; and this is infidelity. It is mad; for what even in the low minded calculation of the men of this world is the object of educating our people? Evidently, that they may be good and happy members of society. Now what

will make them this? Not merely that they should be learned, if we could make them all truly learned—which certainly we cannot: but even if we could, this would not now be enough: for learning does not root out those vices and that depraved selfishness which prevents men being good and happy citizens. So far from it, that such a nation of unprincipled Sophists would be one of the most horrible sights which could be seen. Athens of old in its most waspish unquietness, and France in modern times, in her revolutionary mania, come the nearest to it. So that this is not the secret of national happiness. Neither is it the training up our people in the best ways of gaining wealth: all will allow that to multiply a people's wealth, without at the same time strengthening their principles, is the surest way to enervate and to *ruin* them by luxury. What other spell dissolved the iron sinewed empire of the fourth great monarchy, and subjected imperial Rome to the hordes of the North? What then, even for this world is the object of National Education? Doubtless to form amongst the masses of our population a high toned character; to make them brave, honest, and industrious, and unselfish; and then, to add to this as much of knowledge upon other matters as will enlarge their powers of mind without diverting them from the peculiar duties of their several stations; for this will make them wealthy, powerful, and happy: that is, in one word you educate your people to give them a higher moral tone; and can learning give a man this moral tone? Surely not. If we could furnish to the uttermost the minds of our people we should not thereby have raised them so much as one degree above the original pollution of our corrupted nature. It is Grace and corruption, not learning and corruption which are opposites the one to the other. The most learned man may easily continue the most thoroughly depraved. What human understanding can come up in subtlety and power to his who is God's enemy and man's: who once was, as we deem, second in power and wisdom to none of God's highest crea-

tures, and whom spiritual, not carnal wickedness, drew into rebellion and cast down to Hell? So that the highest spiritual wickedness may be combined with the greatest mental cultivation. What then but God can purify man's heart? And is it not then the mere naked madness of the infidel to endeavour to do this without religion? Is it not in very deed to shut God out of His own world, to believe that other means besides His power can be in truth, "the hammer" and the "fire" to break the heart of man. And as this is madness, so is it also the height of wickedness. What could be more provoking to the Highest than the sight of such a national apostacy? What could more certainly call down His wrath upon us than that we as a nation should determine thus to do without Him, to lay aside His teaching of our sons and daughters, as the useless fable of a darker age, and to set about reclaiming the wild will and forming the proud heart of fallen man by the maxims of the schools, or the dogmas of an earthborn science of economy? This were indeed to fill up the measure of our guilt; and as we have too long left our people heathens by our indolent neglect, it were to make them unbelievers by a busy faithless training.

Brethren if you would turn away so great an evil, zealously support such institutions as that now before you; and answer nobly to such calls as these. Education in some shape our people now will have. If you will not give it to them with religion, you will drive them to these shallow sciolists who will give it them without. And let this be settled in your mind, either they must be educated, *by the church*, or else, *without religion.* The very schemers of the day admit as much. They will tell you, in spite of all their latitudinarian comprehensiveness, that in the teaching of religion there are no common principles or truths upon which the mighty herd of individual sectarians can possibly agree. That they can agree to teach the learning of this world; but that in religion every man must teach himself. See then as a nation what a debt of gratitude we owe to God for our Established Church.

None but an Established Church can take up a position from which it is possible to teach the whole community the truths of revelation. There must be first the concession that she is THE instructor of the nation in religion, (not one sect amongst many) before she can assume the office of religious education. It is therefore through the church established in the land, and through her alone, that there can be any system of national instruction based upon religion. Either we must teach through her; or we must teach without religion, and so make education the very vantage ground of infidelity and atheism.

Settle this, I pray you brethren, in your minds; that with God's help we may stand together as one man against this crafty delusion of the evil one. The battle must be fought. At the breaches made by our divisions the common enemy is entering; and the struggle is indeed for every blessing we possess. For let the education of our people be severed from our church and our religion, let infidelity thus triumph over us, and be sure that God will not be mocked. That which has formed our people's character will then be lost; and by one means or other God will bring us too down into the tomb of forgotten nations, from whom the glory is departed and the sceptre passed away. Without morality no nation can be long together great and happy; and without religion, morals are a name. It is only in God's word that the power which curbs the heart is stored. It is as true in this day as it was in Solomon's, "Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people."* It is as true in us and in each one of our families as when the prophet Jeremiah wrote, God's word is "the hammer, and the fire which breaketh the rock in pieces."

And now from others let us turn more directly to ourselves. There is a most important lesson in this truth which comes home to every one of us in our own personal relation to our God, and to the working of His grace within us. For

* Prov. xiv. 34.

it implies that where the gospel truly does its work on any man, it changes his whole character. This is its essential power, wherein it differs from all other things: it renews and does not merely reform—it does not merely clear the stream as little by little its impurities sink down; but with a mighty power it heals the evil spring. So that hence it follows, that from some cause or other, Christ's religion has failed of its effect in every one in whom it has not wrought, or is not working such a thorough change. But then observe this change is commonly not wrought at once. There are indeed instances in which so distinct a character of alteration is stamped upon some point of time, that a man can look back to it all his life through as the starting place of a new course of affections, feelings, and action;—but this is not the common case. It might have pleased God that it should be; we dare not say that time is needed for the effecting of His works; there is no such thing as time to HIM. Time is a measure for the creature: there is no time to HIM to whom there is neither past or future; to whom eternity is one *now*; in whose sight "a thousand years are but as yesterday when it is passed, and as a watch in the night." But though we dare not seem thus to limit the Holy one, we may say that this is not His ordinary way of working, and therefore not that which we must look for. He works gradually. He works with us; and calls on us to work with Him. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God that worketh in you,* &c." "We then, as workers together with Him, beseech you that ye receive not the grace of God in vain."† And as it is not His way, so is it injurious to be expecting these great and sudden changes. For it leads men to overlook the little daily helps in which salvation lies; those strokes of God's word which are to break the rock of their hearts; and to wait for great changes—which do not come. But in little things there is a real power to the Christian man. In sacraments and the other means of grace; in such

* Phil. ii. 12. † II Cor. vi. 1.

common things as daily prayer, daily reading of God's word, daily striving against selfishness—in such things as these, there is stored up for him that will diligently use them such a true power and presence of the unseen God, that the Christian in their use shall indeed become another man from what he was before; and even on this earth be in very deed "renewed in the spirit of his mind."

From this truth then, brethren note in conclusion these two things;—

First, that here is the greatest encouragement to every real Christian.

What is your great and daily burden? What is your continual hope? Is not corruption your burden; and is it not your hope, that one day you shall be delivered wholly from it? And are you not often tempted in the struggle to despond and doubt? Look on then, brethren, to cheer up these fainting hearts; look on to the end. That is bright enough: it is the "crown of glory, which the Lord shall give unto all them that love HIS appearing." And for the present, lean more upon the faithfulness and power of God your Saviour. He has engaged for you; and when did HE ever fail His word? Has not every generation witnessed to the next His faithfulness and power? Has not every saint along the line ever found Him nigh? Was it ever heard that any trusted in Him, and He failed them? Has not all creation round us testified of His unchanging love and power to those who trust in Him? Have not wild beasts forgotten their ravenous natures rather than harm His children? Have not the seas, and the monsters which dwell in them, become the safe resting places of His chosen ones? Have not the very elements been changed into living witnesses of His remembrance of His people? Have not the flames forgotten to burn, and turned into "a pleasant whistling wind" around those that put their trust in God? And how then can we fear? Hath God forgotten to be gracious? —Have the tender compassions of the Saviour changed? "We

will trust, and not be afraid," for "the Creator of the ends of the earth fainteth not, neither is weary." "He giveth power to the faint; to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; they shall walk, and not faint."*

Note lastly, in the second place, a lesson of self examination. There is this power in true religion; and we, therefore, must find its presence in ourselves if our religion be true. Does it work thus in you? Examine yourselves brethren—try your own selves. Rest not upon feelings; they are ever changing; and to try yourselves by them will puff you up to day, and to morrow morbidly depress you. But is the general stream and tenour of your daily character and conduct altered or altering by the power of Christ's religion? Never was there a greater need to press these questions upon Christian men; never was it so easy to be deluded by a false profession. In some circles it is quite the fashion to be decently religious; and what then is there to detect the unsuspecting self deceiver? Oh, if God were now to send upon His church the sharp blast of a searching persecution, by how many grievous and notorious falls would our ranks be thinned. How would one and another drop off, "having loved this present world." Brethren, let a stranger to your persons, who cannot speak with an offensive personality cast at random the shaft of conviction. Are there not some such here to night? Some who are eager in heaping up riches, and slow in laying them out for Christ? whose hands have gathered largely in this last past week, but whose hands will this night be straitened sorely in giving to their poorer brethren! Are we not come to such a pass that in every congregation there are many who deem themselves, and are deemed

* Isaiah. xl. 28.—31.

by others, christian people, whilst yet their heart is full of covetousness, which our God accounts idolatry?

And is there not then need to awaken you with this loud call to self examination—lest the "midnight cry" find you unprepared?* Surely even now "the judge standeth before the door." Surely even now on every side of us unwatchfulness and sloth are slaying souls, and Christ's church is daily wounded by the low earthly lives and by the miserable doubtful deaths of those in her communion, who have not witnessed to this renewing power of her religion; and of whom therefore we know not how to hope that HE their Saviour did in very deed dwell in them and will raise them up at the great day.

Now to God, the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost be ascribed, as is most due, honour and glory, for ever and ever, world without end, *Amen.*

* James v. 9.

THE END.