

THE

PROMISE OF THE LORD.

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MATT. xviii. 20.

THE two leading features of Prophetic testimony, in its immediate application, were the exposure of the principles of apostasy then at work, and comforting the hearts of the remnant, who were groaning under the sense of it. The contrast to this was, the testimony of false prophets, who always lulled into security the many, and treated the groaning remnant as the enemies of God and His people. "Because with lies ye have made the heart of the righteous sad, whom I have not made sad, and strengthened the hands of the wicked, that he should not return from his wicked way, by promising him life ; therefore ye shall see no more vanity, nor divine divinations ; for I will deliver my people out of your hand ; and ye shall know that I am the Lord." (Ezek. xiii. 22, 23.) In the period just before the Babylonish captivity, we find the two pleas of the Lord against His people to have been, either that they justified continuance in avowed evil, as though the case was so desperate that they could not serve the Lord ; or, that they asserted their innocence, and that their state was one of which the Lord approved. "Thou saidst there is no hope ; no, for I have loved strangers, and after them will I go : yet thou sayest, because I am innocent, surely His anger shall turn from me : behold I will plead with thee, because thou sayest I have not sinned." (Jer. ii, 25—35.) These therefore are the two things which the Lord hateth ; contentedness with avowed evil, under the plea that there is no remedy for us, so that we

must make the best of it; or, forgetting the holiness of God by giving the sanction of His name to that which He disowns, by asserting our innocence and saying, "The temple of the Lord," &c. It is just here that the ministry of the prophets came in, they were raised up as apostasy was setting in, and their testimony multiplied as it advanced to a head. The Spirit of Christ in the prophets, taking up the principles then working, carried them out in all their fearful result, looking through the long and dreary vista to that great and terrible day of the Lord, in which they would be consummated, and met in judgment by the Lord. But whilst there was the most uncompromising witness against present evil, and testimony of God's sure judgment against it, there was invariably the promise of God's favour and protection towards the feeble remnant, faithful in the midst of abounding evil. "The hearts of the righteous were not made sad."—"Say ye to the righteous that it shall be well with him, for they shall eat the fruit of their doings." (Is. iii. 10.) To take one example—in the prophetic strain of Isaiah, chap. vii. to xii.—The Spirit of the prophet, at the very time that apostasy was set in under king Ahaz, after shewing the unchangeableness of the counsel of the Lord, which would stand in spite of all the failures of man and all the confederacies against it, takes a discursive range through all its minor developments, up to the great apostasy. But in the midst of this gloomy prospect, there is the word of comfort for the faithful remnant—"Say ye not a confederacy, to all them to whom this people shall say a confederacy; neither fear ye their fear, nor be afraid.—Sanctify the Lord of Hosts Himself, and let Him be your fear, and let Him be your dread; and He shall be for a sanctuary." And when the promise of security is thus given to the remnant, he fully opens the prospect of increasing judgment, in the oft-repeated burthen,— "For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is stretched out still."

In the Lord Jesus Christ was the perfectness of the prophet, as well as of the Priest. He was that Pro-

phet in whose mouth Jehovah promised that He would put His words, and that he should speak unto the people all that He commanded them. (Deut. xviii. 18.) He had the preeminence as a Prophet: and accordingly we find in our Lord's discourses, the principles embodied, which though not understood at the time, were carried out into detail by the Apostles, under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, who led them into all truth, and brought to their remembrance the things that Jesus had spoken unto them. In the 18th of Matthew, we find the Lord marking, as His Spirit had done in the Prophets of old, the rise of that, which, apparently trivial, would issue in the most disastrous consequences; not only meeting the evil by solemn warning, but viewing it in its results, and comforting His people at all times in the midst of it. The bane of Christianity is there marked as "Emulation," the total contrast to Him who did not strive nor cry, neither did any man hear His voice in the streets. It is striking to observe how this Spirit which is the very cherished principle of the flesh, and which Satan would fain carry into the Church, showed itself in the disciples on occasions apparently the least likely to have excited it. Here we see the Spirit of Christ and the spirit of the world: that which was to regulate the Church, and that which carries on the world, distinguished and set in the strongest contrast.

In Luke xxii. after the Lord had instituted the memorial of death and sacrifice, and had spoken of His betrayal; instead of finding any sympathy in their minds, we read, "There was also a strife among them which of them should be accounted the greatest." And so we read in the chapter before us, "At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" This question was asked after Jesus had, by the payment of the tribute money, exhibited the deep humiliation into which He had come for their sakes. The payment of the half-shekel, the offering of the Lord, Ex. xxx. 13—16, was demanded of Peter, which every one that was numbered, rich or poor, was to give, to make an

atonement for their souls, and this money was to be spent in the service of the Temple. Peter answered hastily for his Master ; but Jesus having first asserted His own right as the Son to be free from the payment, yet, as being made under the law, and having come to redeem them that were under the law, He fulfilled its righteousness in this as well as in the baptism of John. It was at such a season as this when the Son was humbling Himself as the servant, that the minds of the disciples were selfishly seeking exaltation for themselves in the kingdom of heaven. Little did they think that real greatness, the greatness of God, was in His ability to minister to weakness. That He who has His dwelling so high, should humble Himself to behold the things that are in heaven and in earth. That He who inhabiteth Eternity, and whose name is Holy, should dwell in the humble and contrite heart.

It was in this they needed the whole current of the thoughts of their minds entirely uprooted. They must be converted and become as little children, or they would not enter into the kingdom of Heaven. To come into the lowest place here, was the necessary result of greatness in the kingdom of heaven. The only place of greatness in a world of evil, is necessarily to be of no esteem in it. The world knew not the Son ; had He been great in its estimation, it must have been greatness in the estimation of those who had lost all moral perception. This is the hard lesson that we have to learn, and where we are constantly erring as the disciples of old did, the Lord knew it would be because of its contrariety to the flesh. The necessary discipline, in order to teach His children their place of blessing, would be constant mortification, the cutting off the hand, the plucking out the eye. He who knew what was in man, did not merely meet the evil as it showed itself in individuals, but seeing its tendency, most solemnly warns against it, as affecting both the Church and the world. Presumed greatness in any, would be a stumbling-block in the way of the weak ; power such as the flesh could

recognize—authority which the world could own, would always be a stumbling-block in the way of the weak. Even supposing that it was not, as unhappily we know that it hath been exercised against the poor of the flock, yet it would not be that which they needed. Their necessities craved that which was in fulness in the great and good Shepherd; authority in the hands of those who would be examples to the flock, not as those who would lord it over God's heritage. And not only so, the Lord has also marked the effect produced upon the world by the desire of greatness in the Church. He, whilst in the world, stood the humbled and separate One, and therefore His witness against it was so powerful. He was dead to all that was of credit in it, and thus testified that its deeds were evil: so long as He was in the world, He was the light of the world, and His people were to take His place when He left it. "Ye are the light of the world." They by their separateness, standing aloof from all its dignity and glory, were thus to be its light. But woe unto the world because of offences. When His people began to assume worldly greatness and worldly distinction, then the witness was gone; then the veriest woe came into the world, because it was either deceived into the notion that it was itself owned of God, or confirmed in its unbelief by its quickness to mark the entire inconsistency of the professed disciples of Christ with the precepts of their Master. This is the woe which now presses on the world; the only convincing testimony to it of the truth of Christianity is gone, the holiness and love of those who profess it. So blind indeed are Christians to this, that amidst all their boasting of an increase of godliness, it rarely comes into their mind that the one thing needful is wanting, both to answer the heart of the Lord Jesus, or the purpose of their being left in the world; "That they may be one, that the world might believe that Jesus was sent of God." The Lord in leading on the minds of His disciples, proceeds on the assumption of their weakness. He takes up that as the place in which His eye ever saw them,

He could only recognize them as "little ones;" and just in proportion as their standing in the world was otherwise, they ceased to be subjects of this condescending ministry of love, however in faithfulness He might chasten and rebuke them. He opens to us the great principle of heaven, as being that which ministers to weakness placed in the situation of danger from surrounding evil. He would have His people always aware of this their blessing—that the real feeling of their own weakness was strength.—It was this that displayed God's power, sustaining weakness, and making it triumphant over every obstacle.—"Thy strength is made perfect in weakness." The moment we assume any place of strength, and have that support which the flesh can rest in, our proper strength is gone. No human arrangements, however wisely made, and however (as man may think), directed to the Lord's glory, can avail, because they must necessarily interfere with the revealed principles of Him who "chooses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty, and base things of the world, and things which are despised, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are." It is therefore as "little ones," that Believers are the subjects of angelic ministry, who are sent forth to minister to them who shall inherit salvation. "Take heed that ye despise not *one* of these little ones, for I say unto you, that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven. And this is heaven's blessed ministry; this ministry was His glory who came from heaven, not to be ministered to Himself but to minister to others. Real greatness needed not the ministry of others; and in an evil world, the only place of dignity is the ability to rescue from and to keep in the midst of it that which had no strength against it. "The Son of Man is come to save that which is lost." But as if to open to us the whole mind of heaven, and to show us its most favoured aspect towards us—as if to meet the subtle lie of Satan, that our insignificance is beneath God's notice, the Lord proceeds in the detail of blessedness of those

who have no strength, to show how their necessity is graciously met.—“Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that *one* of these little ones should perish.” Thus out of weakness are they made strong. The Lord keep us in the abiding sense of the blessedness of our portion as little children.

That which the Lord first applied in the way of individual blessing, He next applies to the Church collectively. He would not allow of an appeal from any of His people to the world, because it was a tribunal incapable of judging between brethren—Its judgment being necessarily based on presumed right, not on grace. Hence, the injured party is put by our Lord in the place of the conciliator.—“If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; and, if He shall hear thee, then thou hast gained thy brother.” This rule would necessarily prevent the assumption of preeminence among brethren; he would really be the greatest in the estimation of heaven who had most to bear. The only appeal was to the Church, as that which alone could judge righteous judgment; and its award, in case of unsubmission to its authority, was putting without its pale, regarding the offender as a heathen man and a publican. It appears to me, that the Lord still keeping in view the tendency of the principle *then* at work in the disciples' minds, as that which would seek after visible greatness in the world, casts contempt upon all its glory by only owning it as the place into which those would be driven who were excluded by the Church. The solemn sentence of the Church in excluding any from fellowship, would appear in the sight of men, as a powerless act, attended with no immediate results, and not affecting the person or property of the offender. How unlike the award of a worldly tribunal; there the convicted offender is affected by its sentence in present shame, and loss of property, liberty, or life. But the seeming powerless sentence of those, to be excluded from whose fellowship would appear nothing to be dreaded, had the sanction of heaven, and involved consequences

not seen but permanent. "Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven." The leading feature of this discourse of our blessed Lord, is the constant counteraction of the desire after greatness, such as would be cognizable by men. He is always putting His people and the Church in the place of weakness on earth, and giving them strength in heaven. His people, if in their proper place, would be, as Himself, the weak One on earth : for He "was crucified through weakness," but strong in the unseen power of God. Thus has the Lord met the necessities of His people at all times ; however fearful the tide of Apostasy, it could never shut out the real blessing of the faithful Remnant, be it ever so small.— And the reason is, that whatever fearful exhibition of evil there may be in the visible Church, and however unable an insignificant minority are to testify against it, or to meet it in ostensible power, yet the blessing of the dispensation is open to them ; and however little their strength, it is real, for it is the strength of heaven. And in order to meet the extremity of the case of His people, He who foresaw the fearfulness of that Apostasy which would come in, through the desire after greatness and love of preeminence, most graciously meets the case of the feeble few, faithful to Him in their weakness. —"Again I say unto you, that if *two* of you shall agree *on earth* as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven : for where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Now taking this in its moral connexion with the point from which our Lord began this discourse, I believe it to be the abiding testimony to the blessing of His people under all circumstances. We have seen the Church set up most mighty in power and authority, in its entire separateness from the world, even to the merging of all worldly distinction in it. We have seen its spiritual and unseen power, acknowledged even by those without. (Acts ii. 43—47. iv. 37.) We have seen Ichabod written on all this : and in vain search for another exhibition of convincing

testimony against the world, by heavenly power and unity. That which then wrought in the minds of the disciples, even emulation, soon wrought effectually in the Church ; and being of the flesh, led the Church to seek that greatness which the flesh could recognize ; and has issued in that which we do see in Christendom—a system avowedly great in the earth, boasting its superior light above surrounding nations, apparently swaying their destinies, accrediting every worldly distinction, and giving the authority of heaven to principles the most opposite to those of Christ. This is beginning to be felt and acknowledged by thousands ; and what shall they do ? whither shall they go ? what would avail the feeble protest against evils inveterate, fondly cherished, and so entwined with every thing around them ? To reconstitute the Church would be to subvert Christendom. Now the question in many minds naturally is—The professing Church has not abode in the goodness of God—it is that which is to be judged.—Are we still to tolerate it ? still to cry “ The temple of the Lord,” &c. Again, we can see nothing standing in the plenitude of authority to which to look. Shall we say there is no hope ? It is here the Lord meets His perplexed people ; He neither forces them to own that as of Him, which He disowns Himself (save as to judgment), nor drives them to despair by holding out no hope. Here is there rest,—“**WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED TOGETHER IN MY NAME, THERE AM I IN THE MIDST OF THEM.**” And this is the peculiar blessing of our dispensation—the promise of the Lord’s presence by His Spirit, under all circumstances,—“**Lo ! I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.**” Let the remnant be ever so small, even, if it were possible amidst the visible body, two or three only, still the blessing remains to them. The beauty and glory are departed ; but to so insignificant a remnant as this, is the word addressed by the Lord, “**Meet together in my name ;**” and the promise, “**I am in the midst of you.**” That which constitutes this very dispensation—the abiding presence

of the Comforter—the earnest of our inheritance, until the redemption of the purchased possession, is what we are continually prone to forget. We are ever inclined to that which the world can receive, instead of casting ourselves upon that which is our portion. It is not now to go here or there; the Father is not to be worshipped in any given place, neither are believers to look to any thing ostensible to attach themselves to; but to meet together in the name of Jesus. Meeting in His name is the entire counteraction of the two snares to which we are exposed; either of courting fellowship with the world, or cherishing sectarian feelings. Men have been so long accustomed to seek the strength of an Establishment to rest on, as almost, if not altogether, to forget the communion of the saints. This is never closed to us by the Lord, however it may be to our unbelief; and the proof is this—that even two shall experience the blessing of it; for where the Lord's presence is, can there be any lacking? It is therefore that the Apostle so presses the “Not forsaking the assembling of *ourselves* together,” as that which would cheer and direct us in trying circumstances. But union with the world, or the exclusion of any brethren, hinders this effectually: the Lord's Spirit is grieved and restrained, because we are not gathered in His name. Our foolish hearts crave something imposing—it is most contrary to them to continue in the faith of God's promise—we have to watch against an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God. We have to watch against ourselves, lest any of us be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. And that is deceitful which would make us judge by appearances, and not righteous judgment; this we never exercise, except in doing God's will. We are never, I believe, except by our own unbelief, placed in circumstances of balancing evil in order to choose the lesser. So full is the Word of God in its detail, so elastic are its principles, that we can be placed in no trying circumstances but we shall find a way for us to escape, through the Spirit applying the Word, and thus guiding us by His counsel.

Now the dilemma in which many of the Lord's people suppose themselves to be placed, is this ;—They allow that it does no violence to their conscience to accredit as of the Lord any system wherein the world has dominance ; and they cannot construe into an approval of evil, His long-suffering with it. But they allege that they cannot see any thing around them with that real moral glory with which the Church was once invested ; and which might claim their attachment by affording that resting place which their hearts sorrow after. They are in a strait ; and if they do not violence to their conscience, it either interrupts their peace, or hinders their service. It is here the Lord meets them. He anticipated all their weakness, as well as their possible fewness. He knew the desire of their heart unto Him, and could sympathize with that hesitation which would falter in acting in the face of presumed authority, and prevented, if we may use the expression, the desire of a real visible authority to stay upon, by throwing His people entirely off it on Himself.—“ Wheresoever two or three are gathered together in my name, *there* am I in the midst of them.” Here therefore will be the wisdom of those who are led by God's Spirit, to the discovery of the fearful departure of the Church from the goodness of God. Whilst they will mourn over their common sin in the departure of that *glory which the Lord, on leaving the earth, bequeathed to His Church*, they will not be looking for that which might present itself as another witness for Christ, in all the glory of power and authority ; but, remembering whence they are fallen, will be zealous and repent ; and in their penitence they are met by the Lord, who, though He has no where pledged Himself to reconstitute that which man has marred, has pledged Himself to His people to be *ever* with them. And in the blessing thus secured to them, He has provided, at the same time, for the honour of His own name. He has invested them with power to put away from them any one who is called a brother, who continues to walk disorderly, after being warned. Thus, in the worst possible cir-

cumstances, two things are secured to the Lord's people,—their strength and comfort in His presence, and their right to regard as a heathen man and a publican, any one who brings a scandal on his profession, and blasphemes that holy name by which He is called. The people of the Lord can always *act*; if they be His, they have His Spirit, and in that Spirit can meet together, and by that Spirit they can judge, and withdraw themselves from any brother who, after remonstrance, still continues to walk disorderly. So that the comfort of His worshippers and the purity of His worship, is secured, by this charter of the ever gracious and loving Lord, to His very feeble remnant. The simple principle is, that the Lord would never oblige His people to sin. Now I believe it to be just as binding on a Christian to meet together with Christians, as to abstain from those things which may even shock the natural conscience. There is one Lawgiver; and who shall presume to say where His authority is to be qualified? He that said "I say unto you, swear not at all," said also, "Let him be to thee a heathen man and a publican;" and the one ought to be no less binding on the conscience of a true disciple than the other.

This I believe to be the leading of the mind of the great Prophet of the Church throughout this discourse. Clearly perceiving where the Spirit working in the minds of His disciples would issue, He looks to that, and amidst all the maze of difficulty in which they might be placed, provides the simple way for escape, and in the darkest periods of the Church's history, we can find those who have been obedient to the Lord's direction, and find the blessing. The Lord Jesus the Prophet, has not made the hearts of His people sad, nor strengthened the hearts of the wicked. He has not forced them into the assertion, "The Temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these," as though He sanctioned every species of worldliness; nor reduced them to the plea of slothfulness—"there is no hope, the matter is desperate." All that is needed for action and blessing, is faith in the Lord's word. He

never is contented with the evil, however His people may be. It is a most fearful instance of the want of a sound mind, when we find so much perverse ingenuity, so many subtleties, so many analogies drawn, in order to lull the awakened consciences of many into contentedness with evil. Here is a plain direction of our Lord, which was given for them to act on, and applicable to any circumstances. And here is a plain answer to those who charge that as schism, which is bounden duty—separation from the World, as a necessary preliminary in order to our meeting together in the name of Jesus. Blessed be His name He has not left us comfortless; and while it becomes us to be humbled to the very dust for our grievous departure from Him, let us not add this to all our other sins, either to charge Him with unfaithfulness, or to tempt Him by saying, is God among us or not? Whoever believeth on Him shall never be confounded; even in the most disastrous times, when iniquity abounds and the love of many waxes cold, the Lord's people may assemble together, and exhort one another, and the more so as they see the day approaching. As it was of old, so it is now—"Ye have said, it is vain to serve God, and what profit is it that we have kept His ordinances, and that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of Hosts? And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered. *Then* they that feared the Lord spake often one to another; and the Lord hearkened and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name. And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of Hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels, and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him." (Mal. iii. 14—17.)