

Our Need Is God

In recent meditations on the 78th Psalm, I was struck with the multitude and magnitude of God's wondrous works in the sight of, and in behalf of the children of Israel. These gracious and miraculous works were done in their deliverance from Egyptian bondage, their provision and protection in the Wilderness journey, the victories over their enemies, the conquest and security of the Promised Land as well as God's gracious and perfect instructions, intreaties and warnings by His servants. Yet all of this utterly failed to secure for them the blessings of the Old Covenant and to establish for God a people faithful to Him. They remained essentially faithless, failing first to take all He gave them, then they lost it all and were utterly reprobated excepting a small remnant according to the election of grace.

This is all imminently instructive for us who are constantly wrangling over what is the most effective way to bring men to sound repentance and faith, to see souls converted to Christ. Is it the "carrot" or the "stick?" Shall we preach the goodness of God or the wrath and judgment of God? May sinner's hard hearts be melted by reminding them of God's kindness, mercies, protection, provisions, promises, His love for us in the giving of His Son, the Saviour's dying suffering and love for us? It does not seem that God's electing favor in behalf of the Israelites was effective to their conversion. What could be greater than the judgments of God on Egypt while miraculously sparing them, the bringing them through a wall of water on each side, then drowning the Egyptians? Fresh food on the ground for the picking up every day for forty years? Quail by the millions, waist high, plucked out of the air? Water out of a rock? A fiery pillar by night and cloud by day for guidance? Reason would tell us that such favor, goodness and blessings would have secured Israel forever. How could they forget such things? But, astounding as it seems, they very soon rationalized all that and went whoring after other gods.

But does not scripture tell us that the goodness of God leads us to repentance? It is true that statement is made in Romans 2:4, but the very context tells us that it does not effectually secure repentance. This man is going to hell despising God's goodness, and treasuring up wrath for himself. God led His people to the Promised Land, but they failed to possess it.

Nor does it seem that God's displayed holy wrath and judgments were effectual either. Have mortal eyes or ears ever witnessed anything more awesome than the terrifying scenes of Sinai? The thunder, the fire and smoke, the darkness, the relentless voice of the trumpet, the threats of immediate death for coming too close? They well knew those curses and imprecations were not empty. God demonstrated His wrath in swift and severe judgment. Even while they were gobbling down the quail He "came against them and slew the stoutest of them, and struck down the choice men of Israel (Ps. 78:31). In the rebellion of the sons of Korah, God opened up the earth beneath the rebels, swallowing men, women and children alive. But before the cries of the doomed as they dropped into Hell had faded from the ears of the ones who witnessed it, those very witnesses gathered the next day and sullenly accused Moses of "killing the people of the Lord."

Where then is to be found the secret of effective evangelism? Ah, it must be in a more orthodox, theologically correct preaching of the whole counsel of God. Or perhaps the preaching needs be more earnest and fervent, accompanied by passionate intreaties. Or maybe the key lies in a more holy and devout life, a closer and more intimate walk and communion with God by all the saints. Not quite, I don't think. If that were true, we should be seeing far more conversions than we did thirty or forty years ago. Although there has been a great falling away in mainline Christendom, that very falling away has thrown the true saints to seeking God more earnestly than the former generation. This nation abounds with apostate churches and quack preachers, but the saints I know today are the finest I have known in my sixty-six years, and the true men of God I know are living more earnest and devout lives and doing a better job of preaching than they every have, yet seeing less and less response to the gospel.

But does not scripture tell us that the power of God unto salvation is inherent in the word of God preached? Again, there are verses which seem to indicate that, such as Rom. 1:16, John 8:32, Heb. 4:12. But it is evident that these words themselves spoken or written have no inherent power. Such scriptures as I Cor. 1:18, 2:4, 4:19-20, II Cor 6:7, I Thess. 1:5, all declare that must have something else accompany the word or it, too, shall be utterly ineffective. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation only to those who believe it! It bestows no power to believe. To unbelievers, it is foolishness, a stumbling block. Let us be reminded that the children of Israel were not wanting for devout earnest ministers of the word of God. They had Moses and the prophets divinely inspired living oracles of God. They had the very Voice of God Himself from Mt. Sinai.

The shortfall in evangelism today is no different from what it has ever been. The trouble lies not in the revelation or the means of revelation but in the objects themselves. Israel failed because their heart was wrong (Ps. 78:37). They had no heart or soul for God, His covenant or His word. They saw, heard only with natural eyes and ears which cannot receive spiritual realities from God (I Cor. 2:9-12). The pure word of God written in the Bible, seen and read with natural eyes, "understood" with the carnal mind cannot convert. The same word preached and heard only by natural ears will reap no spiritual fruit. Mighty signs, wonders, miracles, God's awful judgments, His tender mercies, even His displayed glories will still leave the sinner unmoved except he be enabled by the infusion of a new heart in regeneration.

The defect in the Old Covenant was not in the Law or the promises of the Covenant. It was in Israel. They did not keep the Covenant because their heart was not in it or in God. The great change and great difference in the New Covenant in the change God makes in the heart. He gives a heart for Him, for His law and His ways, a soul to enter joyfully and fully into all spiritual realities, whether they be the display of God's love or His holy wrath, God's law, His gracious gospel, or His chastening rod. We have no means to effect this change in the heart. That is a prerogative the wise and sovereign God has reserved for Himself alone. Our need is inescapably clear. We need GOD HIMSELF working in the hearts of helpless and hopeless dying sinners!! -C. M.