

GOD WITH US IN NATIONAL CALAMITIES.

"Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, Thou that leadest Joseph like a flock; Thou that sittest above the cherubim, shine forth. Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up thy might, and come to save us. Turn us again, O God; And cause thy face to shine, and we shall be saved." Psalm 80:1-3.

Here is the first paragraph of a prayer of the psalmist, evidently uttered at a time when ancient Israel was suffering from national calamities. In this prayer the psalmist is imploring God to deliver his people from their distresses.

That we are in the midst of national and even international calamities today is evident to anyone who reads the papers or listens to the radio. Let me merely name some of these calamities--

1-Continued crime in high places and not much being done about it.

2-Lack of adequate Christian leadership and statesmanship in our government.

~~3-Continued stale mate in Korea both in the war and in the cease-fire talks.~~

~~4-The attempt of our president to send an ambassador to the vatican in Rome.~~

5-The undercurrent of communism in this country.

6-Wholesale intemperance.

7-Sabbath desecration.

As in the age of the psalmist so today we need to save us the good Shepherd, the glorious Light, the great Strength of Israel, and the gracious Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

As we wander in our frustration we need a Shepherd. In our darkness we need Light, in our weakness we need Strength, in our sinfulness we need a Savior.

1. THE GOOD SHEPHERD. "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, Thou that leadest Joseph like a flock."

The thought of the Lord as our Shepherd is one of the most beautiful and comforting to be found in the Bible. What has been called the "pearl and crown" of all the Psalms is the 23rd, perhaps the most familiar passage in the Old Testament. One time when I was behind five locked doors leading a service where about 80 criminally insane men were present, I said, "Let us all repeat together the 23rd Psalm." A great volume of voices joined me in saying, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." The gospel prophet, Isaiah, takes up the figure in chapter 40, and says, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and will gently lead those that have their young." Then to crown it all Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd layeth down his life for the sheep.--- And other sheep I have which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice, and they shall become one flock, one shepherd."

"Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, Thou that leadest Joseph like a flock." In this section of the Psalms the word "Joseph" is frequently used to apply to all Israel. At the same time the very name of the patriarch, Joseph, brings to mind a character who was faithful in following the Shepherd of Israel, and a man who in the exercise of faith won such victories of faith. Joseph walked by faith and not by sight.

Dr. Zwemer points out that some of Joseph's victories of faith were (1) Victory over temptation to despondency. When thrown into the pit, or when sold as a slave in Egypt, he did not give up to despair and despondency. (2) He won the victory over temptation to impurity in the house of Potiphar. He said, "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" (3) He triumphed over the temptation to abuse his power in Egypt, and (4) he won the victory of the temptation to take revenge on his brethren who had treated him so cruelly. In it all he recognized God's leading hand. He said, "God sent me before you to preserve you a remnant in the earth, and to save you alive by a great deliverance." And by faith Joseph believed that his people would inherit the promised land, and be led back to Canaan under the guiding hand of the Shepherd of Israel, and by faith gave commandment concerning his bones. Such faith as this we need today as we pray, "Give ear, O Shepherds of Israel, Thou that leadest Joseph like a flock."

2. Not only do we need the guidance and care of the good Shepherd, but we also need to be illuminated by THE GLORIOUS LIGHT, and to tarry in His Presence. And so the prayer continues in these words: "Thou that sittest above the cherubim, shine forth."

In His directions concerning the ark in Exodus, chapter 25, God continues to say, "And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy-seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony." Isaiah must have been familiar with this Old Testament symbolism when he said to his people, "Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of Jehovah is risen upon thee." And the apostle John may have had it in mind when he wrote, "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all--if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son, cleanseth us from all sin."

Today in the midst of the shadows, the storms, the strife and the sufferings the Christian still has access to the God of glory, and the privilege of communion with Him. Suffering saints still have the mercy-seat.

"From ev'ry stormy wind that blows,
From ev'ry swelling tide of woes,
There is a calm, a sure retreat;
'Tis found beneath the mercy-seat."

There is a place where Jesus sheds
The oil of gladness on our heads,
A placethan all beside more sweet;
It is the blood-bought mercy-seat.

There is a scene where spirits blend,
Where friend holds fellowship with friend;
Tho' sundered far, by faith they meet
Around one common mercy-seat.

Ah! whither could we flee for aid,
When tempted, desolate, dismayed?
Or how the hosts of hell defeat,
Had suffering saints no mercy-seat.

There, there, on eagle wings we soar,

And sin and sense seem all no more,
And heav'n comes down, our souls to greet,
And glory crowns the mercy-seat."

"Thou that sittest above the cherubim, shine forth."

3. We need not only His glorious Light, "The glory that crowns the mercy-seat", but in our weakness we need THE STRENGTH OF ISRAEL. The psalmist felt this need as he continued to pray: "Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh, stir up thy might, And come to save us."

The tribes here mentioned were immediately next to the ark in the plan of march thru the wilderness. Strength for the wilderness journey had to come from God himself. As in the wilderness days, so at this present time we need to pray that his glory and his power be revealed. More needed that atomic energy is the victorious strength of almighty God. Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.

Individuals of the tribes of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh had experienced His saving power. Of the tribe of Ephraim were Joshua, who led the victorious conquest of the promised land, and Samual, that man of God who was mighty in prayer- a spiritual power who prevailed with God and with man. Of the tribe of Manasseh was Gideon, who delivered Israel from the hand of the Midianites not in his own strength, not by a policy of expediency. On the other hand we read that the Spirit of the Lord clothed himself with Gideon, and that man's motto as he went forward in triumph was, "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon." When the tribe of Benjamin is mentioned our thoughts quickly turn to the New Testament, to that Benjaminite, Saul of Tarsus, who with his God-given strength was used of God to turn the whole course of mankind. He was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, and he was enabled to say, "I can do all things thru Christ who strengtheneth me." O that our nation today might be characterized not by inside rottenness, but by the strength of the Christian character of its individual citizens. The prophet of old tells us clearly the Source and the secret of such strength when he says, "Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard? The everlasting God Jehovah, the creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary; there is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint; and to him that hath 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."

4. In our wilderness wandering we need to follow by faith the Shepherd of Israel. As we grope in darkness and ignorance we need the light and fellowship of His glorious Light. In our weakness we need His omnipotent power. Once more, in our sinfulness we need a GRACIOUS SAVIOR. So our prayer must be, "Turn us again, O God, and cause thy face to shine, and we shall be saved." We and our people have sinned. The vine which God has planted and caused to prosper is imperilled and is perishing. Surely it is time for us to stir up ourselves and take hold of God.

This little word "turn" which begins this final verse before us

is a great prayer word and also a great evangelistic word. The prophet Jeremiah is a prayer for mercy recorded at the close of the book of Lamentations says, "Turn thou us unto thee, O Jehovah, and we shall be turned; Renew our days as of old." In an evangelistic appeal in the book of Ezekiel are found these words, "As I live saith the Lord Jehovah, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel."

Conversion, as commonly used in Christian terminology, has been well described as follows: "Conversion is that act of a regenerated soul excited by the grace of the Holy Spirit, by which it voluntarily and spontaneously turns from sin to Christ as Savior. It first apprehends a point to which to turn, and then a point from which to turn.--It is the desirableness of Christ which causes it to turn from its sinfulness." That desirableness of Christ is felt in the heart when God causes His face to shine, He who shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

You have seen the sunflower early in the morning, with its head bent towards the ground and drooping. But the sun's rays begin to shine upon it, and there is a change in that sunflower. It lifts up its head, and turning, it follows the sun in its course across the skies, and in following blossoms forth into a big beautiful flower. That is a picture of the sinful soul who turns to Jesus who has become the Light of his life.

"I heard the voice of Jesus say, I am this dark world's Light;
Look unto me, thy morn shall rise, And all the day be bright."
I looked to Jesus, and I found In Him my Star my Sun,
And in that light of life I'll walk, Till traveling days are done.

And George Matheson, though physically blind, yet with wonderfully clear vision of the glorious Light of our gracious Savior, wrote these words:

"O Light that followest all my way,
I yield my flick'ring torch to Thee;
My heart restores its borrowed ray,
That in Thy sunshine's blaze its day
May brighter, fairer be."

May each of us today follow the good Shepherd who gave his life for the sheep. "The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Let us look to the glorious Light. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."

Look to Him for victorious strength, as did the apostle who said, "Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us."

Look for salvation into the shining face of our gracious Savior, the Lord of glory, who was crucified.

May the response of each of us be,

"Thou hast bled and died for me,
I will henceforth live for Thee."