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A Word in Season - posted by InTheLight (), on: 2013/1/3 21:56

This was written some 250 years ago but it seems like it could just as well have been written today. A word in season in deed!

A word in season

Dear Sir,

In this dark and declining day, when iniquity abounds, the awful tokens of God's displeasure are multiplying around us, and too many professors, not duly sensible of the real cause of all the evils we either feel, or have reason to fear, are disputing, instead of praying; may the Lord bestow upon you and I, and upon all who fear his name, a spirit suited to the times! that the words of David, "I beheld the transgressors and was grieved," may express the very sensation and frame of our hearts. Permit me to keep this expression in my view while I write, though it may perhaps give my letter something of the air of a sermon.

The Hebrew word answering to "I was grieved," signifies such a kind of grief as is mixed with dislike; such a grief as a believer must feel when he has a sense of his own corruptions. It is frequently rendered, as in Eze. 20:43, to loathe: "you shall loathe yourselves in your own sight." We are not required strictly to hate ourselves, but the evil that is in us. So, when we look at the ungodly, we are not to hate them—^{but} to pity them, mourn over them, and pray for them. Nor have we any right to boast over them; for, by nature, and of ourselves, we are no better than they.

But their sinfulness should cause a dislike, an holy indignation: as it is recorded of our Lord, who, though full of compassion and tenderness, so that he wept over his enemies, and prayed for his actual murderers, yet looked upon transgressors with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts. A feeling of this kind seems essential to that new nature which characterizes the children of God; and where it is not in habitual exercise, it is a sufficient evidence that the soul, if truly alive to God at all, is at least in lean and distempered state. Who can avoid being grieved and hurt by that which is in direct opposition to what he most loves? Believers love holiness; and, unless when stupefied by the arts of Satan, can hardly bear themselves for what they find contrary to it within their own breasts; and must, therefore, of course, be grieved with the sins of others. Like righteous Lot, and from his principles, they are vexed with the filthy lives of the wicked. Can those who reverence the name of God be easy and unconcerned when they hear it blasphemed? No! their ears are wounded, and their hearts are pained. Can those who are followers of peace and purity, behold unmoved the riots, licentiousness, and daring wickedness of those who have cast off both shame and fear? Can those who have affections of mercy and compassion, be unaffected when they see the iron hand of oppression grinding the faces of the poor? Or can any who love the songs of Zion, help being shocked with the songs of drunkards? I trust there are many, who, upon these accounts, are daily crying, "My soul is among lions! Woe is me that I dwell in Mesech? O gather not my soul with sinners." The thought of being shut up forever with the ungodly, would be terrible as hell to a gracious soul, though there were no devouring fire, no keen sense of the wrath of God, to be feared.

They are grieved likewise upon their Lord's account; for they have obtained a spark of zeal for his honor and glory. With Elijah, they are "very jealous for the Lord Almighty." They feel their obligations to him, and know he well deserves to reign in every heart. But when, on the contrary, they see almost everyone in a conspiracy against him, despising him to his face, trampling upon his laws, rejecting his authority, and abusing his patience; their eyes affect their hearts. What man of sensibility could brook to see everyone about him contriving how to affront and injure the person whom he most loved? Now the Lord is the believer's best friend, the beloved of his soul; and therefore he is grieved and troubled when he "beholds the transgressors."

This emotion is likewise heightened by compassion to souls. Grace gives some view of the evil of sin, the dreadfulness of the wrath of God, and the vast importance of that word eternity. Thus instructed in the sanctuary of God, they would be stocks and stones, were they capable of beholding sinners rushing upon destruction without being grieved for them. But they cannot bear it. They cannot but give and repeat a faithful warning, though they have little reason to expect any better return than scorn and ill-treatment, for what the world accounts an impertinent officiousness.

But who then are believers! Who are thus "on the Lord's side?"—if these sentiments are common to all who are born of God? Must we un-Christian perhaps the greater part of professors at this time? for it is too evident, that many, who bear the name of Gospel professors, discover but little of this concern. In general, I think, this subject affords no improper test for the trial of our spirits. The effects of grace in similar circumstances are uniform; but if any, who think themselves possessors of it, feel no grief for the abounding of sin, and the obstinacy of sinners, they differ from the saints recorded both in the Old and New Testament; and it will be their wisdom to examine and take heed lest they be deceived. It is easy to call Christ, 'Lord, Lord'; but a criminal lukewarmness of spirit, where his cause, honor, and Gospel are in question, will one day meet with an awful rebuke, and be treated, in those who make mention of his name, as high treason against his person and government.

But if we allow, that, through the contagion of the times, and the power of Satan, it is possible for true Christians to sink into this indifference, and for the wise virgins, as well as the foolish virgins to sleep, when they should be watching unto prayer; even these have much to fear, lest they should largely participate in the sufferings which the provocation's they connive at have a direct tendency to bring upon a sinful people. When national sins draw down national judgments, the Lord has given us a hope, that he will fix a mark of protection upon those who sigh and mourn in secret before him for the evils which they are unable to prevent. To these he will be a sanctuary; he will either preserve them unhurt, in the midst of surrounding calamities, or he will support them with consolations superior to all their troubles, when the hearts of others are shaken like leaves in a storm. But none have reason to expect to be thus privileged, who have not a heart given them to lament their own sins, and the sins of those among whom they live.

Surely the Lord has a controversy with this land; and there can hardly a period be assigned in the annals of ages, when it was more expedient, or seasonable, for those who fear him to stir up each other to humiliation and prayer, than at present. What is commonly called our national debt, is swelled to an enormous greatness. It may be quickly expressed in figures; but a person must be well-versed in calculation, to form a tolerable idea of accumulated millions. But what arithmetic is sufficient to compute the immensity of our national debt in a spiritual sense? or, in other words, the amount of our national sins? The spirit of infidelity, which for a time distinguished, comparatively, a few, and, like a river, was restrained within narrow bounds—has of late years broken down its banks, and deluged the land. This wide-spreading evil has, in innumerable instances, as might be expected, emboldened the natural heart against the fear of God, hardened it to an insensibility of moral obligation, and strengthened its prejudices against the Gospel. The consequence has been, that profligate wickedness has become almost as universal as the air we breathe; and is practiced with little more reserve or secrecy than the transactions of common business, except in such instances as would subject the offender to the penalty of human laws. O the unspeakable patience of God! The multiplied instances of impiety, blasphemy, cruelty, adultery, and abominations not to be thought of without horror, under which this land groans, are only known to him who knows all things.

There are few sins which imply greater contempt of God, or a more obdurate state of mind in the offender, than perjury; yet the guilt of it is so little regarded, and temptations to it so very frequent, that perhaps I do not go too far in supposing, there are more deliberate acts of perjury committed among us, than among all the rest of mankind taken together. Though some of the Roman poets and historians have given very dark pictures of the times they lived in, their worst descriptions of this kind would hardly be found exaggerated, if applied to our own. But what are the sins of Heathens, if compared with the like evils perpetrated in a land bearing the name of Christian, favored with the word of God, the light of the Gospel, and enjoying the blessings of civil and religious liberty and peace, in a higher degree, and for a longer continuance, than was afforded to any people of whose history we have heard?

The state of the churches of Christ at this time affords likewise ample cause for humiliation and grief. The formality, conformity to the world, the lack of Christian love, the intemperate and unprofitable contentions, which prevail among us, show how faintly the power of the Gospel is felt, even by many who profess to have embraced it. The true and undefiled doctrine of Jesus is not only opposed by its declared enemies, but wounded and dishonored in the house of its friends. And though the sins of those who avow subjection to the institutions of Christ, may not have so gross a stamp of profligacy and immorality, as of those who set him openly at defiance; yet they have, in some respects, an aggravation, of which the others are not capable; as being committed against clearer light, and peculiar, acknowledged obligations. From the consideration of both taken together, who, that has a spark of seriousness and attention, and that has learned from Scripture and history the sure connection between sin and trouble, can forbear trembling at that alarming question, so often proposed to the consciences of ungrateful Israel of old, "Shall not I visit you for these things?" says the Lord: and shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this?" especially when we see the dispensations of God's providence so awfully corresponding with the threatenings in his word.

How much is it to be desired, then, that all who truly fear the Lord, instead of wasting their time in useless squabbles, ma

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y unite in earnest prayer; and, with deep remorse of heart, bemoan those evils which, unless repented of and forsaken, may bring upon us, as a people, such distress as neither we nor our fathers have known! If he is pleased thus to give us a heart to seek him, he will yet be found of us: but if, when his hand is lifted up, we cannot or will not see, nor regard the signs of the times—there is great reason to fear that our case is deplorable indeed.

A few, however, there will be, who will lay these things suitably to heart; and whom the Lord will favor and spare, as a man spares his only son who serves him. That you and I may be of this happy number, is my sincere prayer.

-from letters of John Newton