
A SERMON.

A
S E R M O N

Preached in the Presbyterian Church

A T
A L E X A N D R I A,

On the 9th of May, 1798,

BEING
THE DAY APPOINTED FOR A
GENERAL FAST.

BY THE REV. DOCTOR JAMES MUIR.

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GENESIS XLIX, 14, 15.

*"Issachar is a strong Ass, couching down between two
"burdens. And he saw that rest was good, and the
"land that it was pleasant; and bowed his shoulder
"to bear, and became a servant unto tribute."*

JACOB on his death bed called his sons together, that he might unfold their future destination. It was an early opinion that good men when dying, saw far into futurity. The opinion probably originated from the prophetic spirit, with which at that period, the patriarchs were endowed. Jacob foresaw that his sons would rise into consideration; from each a tribe should spring; the allotment of each, and their national characteristics were distinctly foretold.

I shall through divine assistance, take a general view of the allotment and characteristic ascribed to each tribe, insisting particularly on the allotment and characteristic ascribed to the tribe of Issachar, and shall then shew what instruction the subject affords for our reproof and correction.

Reuben, unstable as water should not ex-

cel. Little is recorded of this tribe, either great or dignified ; they were inferior in number and in power their character assigned them a secondary rank.

Simeon and Levi associated in wickedness, were divided in Jacob, and scattered in Israel—they had no inheritance of their own, but lived among the other tribes. The one were employed in the services of the temple, the other in teaching the young.

The tribe of Judah possessed like a lion undaunted courage, they were terrible to their enemies, repeated victories deterred the invader, and commanded security and peace.

Zebulon was the father of a commercial tribe, attached to business, and enjoying a situation favourable to their views.

Dan, as a serpent, was more subtle than valorous. Gad placed on the frontiers, maintained that dangerous position. Naphtali, like a hind, took a free range. This tribe had a high sense of liberty. Their manners were affable, and their address smooth. Benjamin, ravaging as an wolf, disdained an oppressive yoke.

A lion was the characteristic of Judah ; a serpent of Dan ; a hind of Naphtali ; a wolf of Benjamin, but Issachar was characterised as “ a strong ass, couching down between two burdens,” patient is this animal and hardy, it was employed in rural services. No beast of the same bulk can bear equal burden, it lies down with its load hanging on either side. Such the descendants of Issachar, living in a rich country, they submitted to the toils of agriculture ; they led a retired life, they

were unwilling to be disturbed, they purchased their ease by any debasement, and at any expence. Foes, domestic or foreign, might insult or oppress, be a dead weight on the right side or the left, they could not be roused, give us our ease, and we do not envy Naphtaliⁱ the charms of freedom, nor Judah the glory of martial deeds.

Abundance tends to enervate and degrade the mind. To the tribe of Issachar, a valuable lot was assigned; they enjoyed a full provision; prosperity rendered them selfish and pusillanimous. In their private interest, the general interest was lost. They had no public spirit. My text passes a censure on the national character as debased and obstinate. Their glory was departed, their houses was laid in the dust.

The present constitution of things, affords the fullest scope for exertion either in our individual or social capacity. Health and reputation, and fortune, depend in a great measure, on the conduct which we pursue. The active and temperate, the steady and moral, the prudent and industrious generally do well, filling a useful and creditable rank; an opposite character is subjected to infamy and ruin. In our social capacity much depends upon our being united. A good government is the centre of union. At all times, especially in times of danger, it demands the decided countenance of each. This is the bulwark which Providence has set around our property and lives, remaining we are safe, but removed, the enemy bursts in like a flood. Each are concerned to support government.

It is a higher object than either conveniency or ease, or fortune, or life. To feel this concern is the mark of a noble spirit. With such a spirit God is well pleased. It is always high and determined when he designs to bless a nation. A different spirit, actuated by selfish views only, disposed to blame, to vilify, to embarrass the powers which are, panting after confusion and change, is of infernal origin, and is permitted to scourge the earth. Men of such a spirit are highly criminal. Criminality is attached to actions according to the mischief which they occasion. The interested, the restless, the aspiring, tend to involve a whole nation in ruin to an extent, and in a degree incalculable.

I know not that Issachar was active in pulling down the government. Their crime was of a negative kind. They gave the government no effectual support. A palsy may be as fatal as a fever. Standing still, when the fire begins to kindle, is as certainly blameable for consequent damage, as kindling that fire. A neutral position when the state is in danger, is the position of an enemy. Issachar was shamefully passive, take my purse or my crop ; neglect or abuse me, but let not my possessions or life rest on the hazard of a campaign, or of a battle ; what an ignominious spirit, “ You invited abuse O Issachar, and were worthy to bear the burden and to groan under tribute.”

But can a bold independent spirit accord with the spirit which the scripture inspires ?—Perfectly—What a pitiful figure Issachar makes when contrasted with Judah the old lion, and Benjamin the ravening wolf.

The hero is raised by the apostle Paul to the same rank as the martyr. "The time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae ; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets :

"Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions."

John the Baptist certainly knew something of the genius of the gospel, and what says he to soldiers ? Lay aside your arms, be buffeted, be spoiled, be trampled upon, yet resist not ; he says no such thing ; he only guards soldiers against oppression and mutiny. None are more celebrated for their faith and piety than two centurions of the Roman army, the one mentioned in the Gospel, the other in the Acts of the Apostles. They were military men previously to their believing, nor was it inconsistent after they did believe, to continue military men still. The true spirit of the gospel, were all men christians, would indeed effectually extirpate crimes and animosity ; and the time may, nay, the time shall come, when the spirit shall universally operate for that purpose, until *then* government is a sword which punishes the turbulent and protects the peaceful. The tribe of Issachar were afraid to wield this sword, their daftardly spirit was at once their disgrace and their crime.

From this passage of scripture, it appears, that the security and happiness of a nation depends on the national character, the leading object in good governments, is to secure men in the free exercise of their religion, and to

guard their reputation, their property, and their lives. When government has this object steadily in view, and meets a determined support, then the national spirit is virtuous and independent, such a nation has nothing to fear. It is warmed with a pure and ardent flame which will consume the enemies of their peace, and enrich posterity with the best of blessings.

True religion has a favourable aspect towards our present, as well as our future interests. It is a divine principle extensive in its operation. It renders the conduct dignified and beneficial. If God be the object ; it inclines us to fear, worship, and obey : if ourselves ; it inclines us to be temperate, and watchful : if one another ; to be kind, faithful, and just : if society ; to be public, spirited, and peaceful. All this is essential to the christian character.

Religion not only shews the excellency of each duty apart, but also distinguishes their relative excellency. The moon and the stars are well calculated to rule the night, but they give way to the sun appointed to rule the day. Self-love must not appear when national service requires a sacrifice of ease, health, or life : nor must attachment to country have any weight when it interferes with our duty to God, and to religion.

The operation of the religious principle in any one instance, gives reason to conclude the existence of a religious character ; and the failure of the operation of the religious principle in any one instance, gives reason to conclude that the religious character exists not. To fear God for instance, to love one another, to be

sober minded, respectively mark one who is truly religious : but, to forget God, to hate one another, to be riotous, respectively mark one who has no religion at all. This is the reason why the apostle Paul celebrates so highly the public, undaunted spirit of David, of Samuel, and of the prophets. They were men of a choice temper, and of the best principles, on whose attachment and exertion their country had the firmest reliance. A different temper, and different principles are some of the national crimes which we this day lament. They argue a great defect in the character. They leave room to suspect that religion is at a low ebb.

Let the national spirit be virtuous and high, let men be determined to preserve their religious, and their civil liberties, what power dare resist that spirit ? or oppose that determination ?—It might as safely rouse the lion, or face the bear, bereaved of her whelps.

Liberty, in our day, has been a name greatly abused, it has been the rallying point for anarchy and irreligion ; for disorder and blood. If this be liberty, O my soul, come thou not into its secrets, unto its assembly, mine honour be not thou united. In its rage it has slain the innocent ; in its self-will, it has pulled down the truth. Cursed be its rage for it was fierce, and its wrath for it was cruel. Its adherents shall be divided, and their hopes scattered with the wind.

Far be it from me to recommend such a spirit in any manner, or to any degree. It prevails indeed ; but

it is an infatuation—a madness—an enemy has disseminated tares. The body politic is infected with disorder, vain men, as the scripture calls them, sons of Belial, exist in different quarters, who wish an end to good order, and to religion. Camelion-like, they appear in various hues. They cover their detestable schemes under a venerable name; but the stroke is aimed at order and at piety. If the banner of the cross has, in former times, waved at the head of an impious and an abandoned crew; no wonder if the tree of Liberty has, in our days, been moistened by the blood of the innocent, and has yielded the Sodom apple, fair in appearance but bitter to the taste.

Shall our worst enemies be those of our own household? Shall Citizens betray their country?—Members of the state expose its weakness? Shall the wisdom of the National Pilots which has steered our bark safely during a stormy season, amidst seas and rocks, be branded as folly? Are pretences the most frivolous and capricious sought out to impute blame?—If at one time you be restrained from hostility; that is blamed. If at another you are put in a posture of defence; that is blamed: Are such men lovers of their country? Is not their conduct highly unreasonable? Something is amiss. We either do not perceive our true interest, or we are weighed with selfish considerations.

In such circumstances let every friend of his country search out the hidden leaven and remove it. Let the temper of the passive Issachar be his abhorrence. Sit not easy under your burdens. Be not satisfied with

a private advantage. Feel your country's wrongs, and set your face against its enemies. Indulgent to what degrades, and has a tendency to enthrall our land, you offend against God, and against society. Let this day's devotion excite and strengthen the spirit of religious and civil freedom. It will tear the disguise from foes within; it will overawe those without, who meditate our ruin. When the Maccabean band, a mere handful of men, were inspired with a public spirit, the terrible army which had insulted and oppressed them for many years were scattered as chaff before the wind. This spirit is the sword of the Lord, and of his servants. In the morning it devours the prey, in the evening it divides the spoil.

Mistake me not, I speak not in favour of war—no—war we ought to deprecate, and to avoid.—But war is not the worst of evils. What, I hear you say, what can be worse? It would be worse to be at the beck of a power which would order you to exhaust the public treasures, to repair the broken fortunes of its leaders; it would be worse to divide a people from their government, that the boar out of the wood might waste them, and the wild beast of the field might devour them; it would be infinitely worse to erase from our land the solemn institutions, nay, even the venerable name, of our holy religion. If these can be yielded without a struggle, your independence is a vain phantom, and the revolution by which this was established was unnecessary, wanton, and murderous—No, my brethren the blessings of a good Government, and of religion must

not be given up. These are the gifts of God, and you would be treating him ill, willingly to part with his gifts ; I say willingly, for without your own consent, neither earth, nor hell can wrest them from you.

Whilst this day we bewail the degraded state into which many among us are sunk ; whilst we bewail the neglect of religion whence that degradation originates ; whilst we confess our sins, and deprecate the punishment which our sins deserve, let us not overlook those rays which gild the threatening cloud. We have amongst us true patriots. Both the present and the late Presidents know the true interests of their country, and did, and still do steadily adhere to that interest. We have many who from the purest motives support our happy government ; some who were misled have returned to just principles. There is a remnant who fear God, amidst many calamities, we enjoy many blessings ; we have reason to sing of judgment and of mercy. Let us offer praise for what we enjoy ; let us deprecate the evils which we either dread or feel ; let us cease to do evil and learn to do well, then tho' God has been angry with us, his anger will turn away from us, and he will comfort us.

F I N I S.