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A Sermon Preached by A. C. Van Raalte, Entitled, "A Day for Repentance and Prayer."

A. C. Van Raalte

Gordon Spykman

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President's Day - Holland, Michigan - July 4, 1864

A sermon preached by A. C. Van Raalte, entitled, "A Day for Repentance and Prayer." It was published in Pioneer Preacher, by Gordon Spykman, pages 100 to 105.

Original in the Archives of Calvin College.

Translated by Gordon Spykman.

President's Day - Holland, Michigan - July 4, 1864

A Day for Repentance and Prayer

Jeremiah 18:5-10

In this morning hour a word of self-examination and humiliation.

While in the potter's workshop Jeremiah receives a message for Israel which had a double aspect, namely:

a) That God holds almighty, sovereign authority over a nation.

b) That God's exercise of his supreme power is characterized by justice and mercy.

Can I not deal with you, O Israel, like this potter? Behold, as clay in the hand of the potter so are you in My hand.

Incontestable authority. . .

Irresistable power. . .

to form nations unto His end. Only God's authority over the nations is purer than that of the potter over the clay. And his ability to form people according to his will is more unlimited than the potter.

1) Behold God's supreme power over us. He does not owe us anything. He does not owe us an accounting. No more than it behooves the clay to argue with the potter is it fitting for us to question God, even less so.

2) It is easy for God to make of us whatever pleases him, just as the potter can make and alter a piece of clay. Our times and destiny are in God's hand. This is even true of nations, those powerful bodies on earth. They are as clay in God's hand. Job 12:23-25—He makes nations great, and he destroys them; he enlarges nations, and leads them away. He takes away under-

standing from the chiefs of the peoples of the earth, and makes them wander in a pathless waste. They grope in the dark without light; and he makes them stagger like a drunken man. Isaiah 40:15—Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales. Truly, we are no more than clay in the hand of the potter.

3) a) God wills to achieve his goals, his glory. And it shall happen. If we are unwilling to be examples of God's mercy, then we will become examples of his justice. Proverbs 16:4—God has made everything for its purpose, us too, whom He made of the dust of the earth. Should we not be subject to our Maker's wisdom and will? Isaiah 45:9—Woe to him who strives with his Maker, as an earthen vessel with the potter.

b) Fairness and goodness accompany God constantly in the exercise of that authority and power in his regime. His sovereign dispensation is marked by pure wisdom and love. His punishments too are not arbitrary, but just and righteous. As judge He reveals himself as the righteous and compassionate one.

1) Therefore if He uproots, breaks down and destroys a people, it is because of their sins. For the Lord says, national abasement and conversion arrests and turns away God's judgments.

Such uprooting, breaking down and destroying: what a fearful, terrible thing is expressed in these words. We are witnessing such events right now. But if such a nation repents under such judgment (judgment is sent for that purpose—and then it is high time to discern God's voice in it and to take it to heart) then God will turn to that nation in mercy. God did that repeatedly during the time of the judges and raised up deliverers. That is the way it was with Nineveh. Repenting of sin brings about deliverance from punishment. And however deeply a people is cast down and defeated, God is abundantly able to heal and rebuild.

2) As repentance in response to sin lifts God's judgments, so sin robs a people of God's blessing.

When God speaks a nation experiences edification and pros-

perity. Then the nation grows and is enriched and enlarged. Then business flourishes and the nation lives in safety under justice, law, order and rule.

But when under such blessings a nation departs and does not obey God's voice, and when piety and the service of God perish and uprightness is trampled, then God will pluck up what He has planted, break down what He built, and withhold what is good. Israel heard the good news, but their unbelief and sin cast them back into the wilderness. Sin is the source of trouble. It forfeits God's promises. It makes prayer powerless. It cancels all pleasure. It prolongs hard feelings. It leads into tight and deep places. It hinders man's wellbeing.

Application (T.P.)

We had to say these things, occasioned by Jeremiah's message, not only concerning Israel, but with equal emphasis to every person and nation until the end of time. For therein are proclaimed God's immutable principles for his governance of the world.

1) God wants to say this, that we are in his hand. Our destiny depends on him. Our national condition is shaped by his hand. He makes us just what we are. For we are clay, and that clay is under no one's control but God's. He surrenders the honor of his sovereign rule to no one. He alone forms the light and creates the darkness. He says: I make peace and bring about evil. According to Amos, both good and evil proceed out of his mouth. God could have given us peace just as well as turning the country upside down and wringing out the whole nation by the terrible fury of the Civil War. Do we really believe that God's hand is striking us? Or do we see only the mediating causes? Have we feared God and stood in awe of him? Have we searched out and learned what He wants us to learn? I fear that we were often more concerned with the rebels, with the faults of this one or that, than with God. And how have we conducted ourselves under these divine lashings? Have we felt no pain even though the country is torn and bloody? Even

though He delivers heavy blows and the pressure is mounting? Perhaps we have nourished ourselves on anger and bitterness against the rebels, or found fault with the military leaders or the administration, or with the party. There has been quibbling instead of humiliation. Or perhaps we have viewed the guilt of others as the cause of all that suffering and accused them of it, as if God were not speaking directly to us. It is not well with us if we have failed to see God's hand in it all and have not learned to recognize in his hand a just display of supreme power. As though the Lord of life and death and of all blessings cannot do what He desires with his creatures. If we have not learned to expect rescue from him alone, if we have not learned under his judgments to rejoice that He who does all things for the glory of his name also accomplishes his glory even in his judgment. . . .

2) God's dealings are just. Why then are we not liberated? Why has the crisis risen to such a height? God gives us the answer: persisting in sin robs us of God's blessings. Repentance leads to a lifting of the sentence. That uprooting, breaking down, destroying and wasting process which we witness is of God, because of unconfessed sins with which we have not broken. To search them out and demolish them is our task. This is the way to healing and restoration.

Look at the end-result of your sin, what great devastation and shedding of blood and burdens. And to lay all that down at your doorstep! Isn't that too much to take upon yourself?

Then face up to the reason for the rod so scourging us. Otherwise we will be more concerned about our sorrow than our sins. Keep your eye also on the goal of this chastisement and discipline. It is directed against your enemy, sin, in order to save you.

This is then a voice which beckons us to conversion, and is therefore a ground for freedom to return to God. Consider the goal of sanctified discipline—how desirable it is.

We have been afflicted for three years already. Have we multiplied or decreased our sins? As our blessings mount and even as the chastisements increase, our sins become more heinous.

We know that the paths of the Lord are just. And the righteous walk in them. But transgressors shall stumble in them.

a) The transgressor is offended by God's doings. Under God's judgments he is hardened, becomes rebellious, indifferent, so that he sinks deeper and wanders further from God.

b) The righteous, sanctified by the hard hand of God, learns with the speaking church to say in the words of Isaiah 26:8-9: In the path of thy judgments, O Lord, we wait for thee; thy name and thy remembrance is the desire of our soul. My soul yearns for thee in the night; and my innermost spirit seeks for thee early. For when thy judgments are upon the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.

Such is the conduct of those sanctified by the judgments of God. They wait upon the Lord when the outlook is dark, awaiting his intervention, his glorification, his help, his comfort, the fulfillment of his promises. From the same hand that punishes they look expectantly for deliverance. They do not think ill of the God who strikes and chastises, but rather press ever closer to him.

Thy name and thy remembrance is the desire of our soul—instead of forsaking God in times of hardship, or by fault-finding to turn away from him, or being swallowed up by lack or loss, by danger or troubles. Thus God's name becomes greater, more precious, more indispensable. If the knowledge and confession and presence of that name in our soul is our great desire, then God becomes more precious when earthly goods are taken away. With my soul I have yearned for thee in the night, and with my innermost spirit I will seek thee early.

Such true relief, comfort, support and peace in the midst of punishment and devastation enlivens prayer and makes it more earnest. It makes men fearful, not in order to curse God, but to seek him quickly. For God remains our expectation, sun and shield. For when thy judgments are upon the earth, then the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness.

They see the oppressive judgment and trust the glorious purpose of God, full of grace. And even when the earth is turned

to desolation, God's voice is still heard and his joy seen, which leads men to a recognition of God and the exercise of righteousness. This goal is our great comfort. To learn righteousness is the main purpose.

Demand God's righteousness. Jesus died for this. And this is also his purpose for man. Not that oppression can accomplish this better than God's Word. But this revelation of God is the means in God's hand unto knowledge of God which converts the heart.