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The Unquenchable Power of the Protestant Reformation

*"When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the LORD shall lift up a standard against him,"
Isaiah 59:19.*

The Second of four messages preached 20 years ago, in Kilskeery Free Presbyterian Church by the then minister, Rev Ivan Foster, to commemorate the glorious Protestant Reformation

Looking back upon history is unfashionable in these ecumenical days. It is nevertheless wise and in keeping with the Word of God. For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope, Romans 15:4. The enemy referred to in our text may be identified from Genesis 3:15. And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel. The spirit of the enemy of all that is of God is found in the devil and his agents. He is the great adversary of the good and the godly. As the enemy, he has sought the utter destruction of God's people and the witness to Him and His glory that they bear. He wishes not merely to oppose or hinder but to destroy utterly. Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it, John 8:44. To that end he comes in like a flood.

Many times in the history of the world has the satanic flood poured in upon the Church of Christ, forcing the faithful remnant to seek refuge in the dens and the rocks of higher ground to escape its fury. There have been times that the flood has almost succeeded in its purpose.

Genesis 6-7 records two floods. There was the flood of corruption and violence from which Noah and his family escaped by the grace of God and which occasioned the second flood referred to in that portion of God's Word, the floodwaters of judgment that swept the earth clean of that generation of wicked men and from which Noah and his family also escaped. The first flood was one of iniquity and had its source in the devil's promptings of wicked men to engage in the vilest practices, until the earth was filled with their iniquity. The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled (to overflowing) with violence, Genesis 6:11. Romans 1 records another such flood of iniquity that left but a few true believers before its onrush, and swept the Gentile nations into pagan darkness. Wherefore God also gave them up (handed them over) to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves: who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen, Romans 1:23-25. Prophecy tells us of another great flood of iniquity that will devastate the earth just before the return of Christ. This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived, 2 Timothy 3:1, 13.

RISING WATERS

The discerning child of God may already see the rising waters of that last great apostasy overflowing out of the Bible-rejecting, so-called Protestant denominations, and linking up with the flood waters of false Christianity that are found in the evil ditches of Roman Catholicism and the various 'Orthodox' churches of eastern and northern Europe and Asia and then going on to merge with the rivers of paganism, the levels of which are beginning to rise once more. That flood, when it reaches its fullness, will be met by the judgment of Christ administered at His Second Coming.

TURNING BACK

Turning the pages of history back to the 15th century, we see Europe covered by a flood of darkness and superstition where once gospel light and order had flourished. Only a few survivors of the flood could be found scattered across the dark continent. Bishop J C Ryle, the first Protestant bishop of Liverpool, wrote of



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this period in the following words. Before the Reformation, one leading feature of English religion was dense ignorance. There was among all classes a conspicuous absence of all knowledge of true Christianity. A gross darkness overspread the land, a darkness that might be felt. Not one in a hundred could have told you as much about the Gospel of Christ as we could not learn from any intelligent Sunday School child. He went on: Before the Reformation, another leading feature of English religion was superstition of the lowest and most degrading description. . . . The religion of our ancestors . . . was little better than an organized system of Virgin Mary worship, saint worship, image worship, relic worship, pilgrimages, almsgivings, formalism, ceremonialism, processions, prostrations, bowings, crossings, fastings, confessions, absolutions, masses, penances, and blind obedience to the priests. It was a grand higgledy-piggledy of ignorance and idolatry, and service done to an unknown God by deputy. The only practical result was that the priests took the people's money, and undertook to ensure their salvation, and the people flattered themselves that the more they gave to the priests, the more sure they were of going to heaven. . . . Before the Reformation, another leading feature of English religion was wide-spread unholiness and immorality. The lives of the clergy, as a general rule, were simply scandalous, and the moral tone of the laity was naturally at the lowest ebb. Of course grapes will never grow on thorns, nor figs on thistles. To expect the huge roots of ignorance and superstition, which filled our land, to bear anything but corrupt fruit, would be unreasonable and absurd. But a more thoroughly corrupt set than the English clergy were, in the palmy days of undisturbed

Romanism, it would be impossible to imagine. (Five English Reformers.) The Reformation was God's response to that flood. Our text tells us:—

I. HEAVEN RESPONDS TO THE ENEMY'S FLOOD

God is committed to the preservation of His people. When the enemy attacks, the Lord will most certainly defend. And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand, John 10:28.

1. God is bound by an everlasting covenant to His people. That covenant was drawn up in eternity between the Father and Christ, the representative of His elect. It guarantees the salvation of that people from sin and their preservation unto glory. Christ, having fulfilled His obligation to redeem a people by the shedding of His blood at the cross, will preserve that people from every attack of the devil.

2. God is bound by love to His people. The spirit of the promise of God to Israel may be claimed by every true child of God. Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour . . . Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee, Isaiah 43:1-4. The elect are precious to God and He will not permit their harm.

3. God is bound by innumerable promises to His people. Who can number the promises of God? How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them! Psalm 139:17. Peter called the promises exceeding great and precious.

4. God is bound by His undying opposition to sin to His people. Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity, Habakkuk 1:13. God will not ignore sin, especially when it is committed against His people. Such things offend and wound God Himself, as was seen in the case of Saul of Tarsus' persecution of the early church, And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest, Acts 9: 5. The persecution of the saints was a direct attack upon Christ Himself.

II. THE NATURE OF HEAVEN'S RESPONSE

Lift up a standard against him. The Hebrew is difficult to translate. The word translated by the phrase shall lift up a standard against him carries the meaning to put to flight. God's means of doing this is by the raising of a standard. The standard is Christ. And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an



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ensign of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek, Isaiah 11:10. The Lord Jesus is the root out of Jesse and is therefore Heaven's Ensign or Standard.

1. He is the standard the enemy dreads. The appearance of Christ struck terror into the devils He encountered during His earthly ministry. Two instances will illustrate this truth. And there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, saying, Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God, Mark 1:24. And when he was come out of the ship, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, . . . when he saw Jesus afar off, he ran and worshipped him, and cried with a loud voice, and said, What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of the most high God? I adjure thee by God, that thou torment me not, Mark 5:2, 6-7. Both these devil-possessed men knew the Saviour and trembled in fear at His presence.

2. He is the standard by which God rallies His people. When an army is broken and scattered, the raising of the standard gives a rallying point to the scattered ones. During the Reformation, the preaching of Christ proved to be a rallying call to the scattered flock of God. How welcome must have been the sound of gospel preaching in nations where its sweet message had rarely been heard for centuries!

3. He is the standard by which God recruits the elect. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me, John 12:32. This is a reference to the elect. God's method of calling His elect from the mass of humanity is illustrated for us by the Saviour in John 10:2-4. But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. Without that effectual call by the Shepherd no sinner can come to Christ for salvation. No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him, John 6:44.

III. THE UNQUENCHABLE POWER OF HEAVEN'S RESPONSE

The lifting up of the standard is by the power of the Holy Spirit. The seven-fold fullness of the Holy Spirit is declared for us in Isaiah 11:2. He is the spirit of the LORD, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD. With such a standard bearer going before the faithful remnant of contenders for the faith, victory is assured. Fire and sword did not stop our Protestant fathers as, filled with the grace of the Holy Ghost, they stood firm against the onslaught of popery's fury. It was His grace that made their witness invincible.

1. They were endued with His Wisdom. The Holy Spirit knows what is in man and enables the servants of Christ to speak to men's hearts. It is under His strivings that men have revealed to them what is in their hearts. The brokenness of men before the gospel results alone from the Holy Ghost working amongst sinners.

2. They were endued with His Might. But truly I am full of power by the spirit of the LORD, and of judgment, and of might, to declare unto Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin, Micah 3:8. He is the Spirit of might and power by Whom God has accomplished all His works of creation. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters, Genesis 1:2. The power that was at work in creation is engaged in the overthrow of evil in the day of Heaven's response to the enemy's attack. The mighty conversions wrought in a day of revival are evidence of His power at work.

3. They engendered a fear of the Lord. The ministry of a man endued with the Holy Spirit is ever accompanied by the fear of God falling upon his hearers. It is thus that such preaching humbles nations. Such a ministry will bring the careless and indifferent to a place of trembling before God.

An absence of the fear of the Lord is a mark of apostasy. Know therefore and see that it is an evil thing and bitter, that thou hast forsaken the LORD thy God, and that my fear is not in thee, saith the Lord GOD of hosts, Jeremiah 2:19. Modern preaching has filled man with pride. Man believes himself to be as God. The devil's lie to Eve is taught still and that from many pulpits. As man approaches the twenty-first century, he



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feels no need of God. Such defiance of God is the product of modern theology.

Where there is fear-provoking preaching, men and governments will yield before the gospel for such fear is the beginning of wisdom.

Such a fear of God is a prerequisite for coming to Christ. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid, Luke 2:9. Such fear prepared the hearts of the shepherds for the good news of the gospel which they gladly received and obeyed. Men fear God when they are presented with a sight of their own sinfulness in the light of His glory and power and holiness. Such a vision of God and our own sinfulness is granted under Holy Ghost preaching.

How this land needs a baptism of the fear of God! Its appearance will be the first signs of Heaven's response to the present flood of iniquity that threatens to engulf us all. How God's servants need such an endowment of power today! I own my great need before you all and request your prayers, dear child of God, that I and all of God's faithful ministers might be endued with power from on high.