

CHAPTER ONE

THE CALL TO PROPHETIC STUDY

MAN'S thoughts about the future and the unseen are of little worth. They are at best but dreams; no more than the blind guesses of fancy. They approach no nearer to the truth than do a child's conjectures regarding the history of some distant star, or as to the peopling of space beyond the outskirts of the visible creation.

But the thoughts of God respecting the future are precious above measure. They are truth and certainty, whether they touch upon the far-off or the near, the likely or the unlikely. They are disfigured with no miscalculations, for they are the thoughts of the great Designer regarding His own handiwork. They are the thoughts of an infinite mind; and they are the thoughts of that mind upon a subject utterly inaccessible to us, yet entirely familiar to Him who sees the end from the beginning, and whose wisdom has prearranged the whole.

These thoughts of God about the future are what we call *prophecy*; and, in studying prophecy, we are studying the thoughts of God, the purposes of His heart. Of these His secrets, He is not unwilling that we should be partakers; nay, He has spread them out before us, He has recorded them for our use; and deep must be the guilt, as well as incalculable the loss, of those who turn aside from such a study; who will listen with some interest, perhaps, to *man's* ideas of what is coming to pass upon the earth, but never think of enquiring what is the *mind of God*.

With what breathless interest will a company sometimes gather round a sagacious observer of the times, who has seen much, and noted much of what is passing in the various circles, outer and inner, of this ever-moving world! How eagerly will they catch up and repeat his opinions as to coming

events, though all is conjecture and uncertainty! But, let a hint be cast in of what God has spoken, how coldly it is received! As if human uncertainties were better than Divine certainties; the guesses and dreams of man more worthy of being listened to than the sure revelation of God. When the prophet is man, all men listen; when the prophet is God, they turn heedlessly away.

Yet that future, with all its vastness of interest and of moment, is *man's* future, we may say, more than God's. It is a future in which all human destinies are wrapt up; and to discover what that future is to be, is worth the most profound and painful inquiry. If that future be *my* future, and not a future of shadows but of realities, how deeply does it concern me to know whether these are to be the realities of an endless night, or the realities of an everlasting day? It is not enough that my own individual lot for eternity be made sure; so that, in believing the record which God has given of His Son, I know that I shall never die; I cannot help looking around me upon this miserable world, and asking, What is its future history, its final destiny? Is it light, or is it darkness? Is it but a prolongation of its present wretchedness and sin, or is it a restoration to blessedness and glory? Should it not, then, be with deepest and most thankful joy that we learn that God has drawn aside a slight fold of the curtain, and given us a glance into the long vista of events on which we and our world are so soon to enter? Should not everything that God has revealed concerning *our* future be welcomed, both for its interest and its certainty? Should it not be studied and searched, that we may stand and survey that future somewhat in the position and from the point in which God surveys it, and may in

some measure be enabled to enter into His mind respecting it?

For we are not one, but many; or, rather, I should say, we are not many, but *one*. We are members of one household, and our household interests should not be absorbed in our individual ones. We belong to one world; we are the tenants of one star; and our enquiry should be, not merely, How shall *I* escape from the calamities of which all its inhabitants are the heirs, and wing my way to some brighter orb on which darkness and the curse have never alighted? But, what is to be the destiny of this my native planet, and of that race which has peopled it for six thousand years?

All creation lies in ruins. The garden of the Lord has become a wilderness; and that which rose up into beauty under the blessing of Jehovah, is now withering away beneath His curse. Its falling leaves, its dying flowers, its clouded skies, its stormy deep, its swollen rivers, its crumbling rocks—all tell us this. These are its weeds of mourning; these are the groans of its travail and bondage. But what is to be the issue of all this blight, and change and death? God alone can inform us; and He has done so in His prophetic word. The destiny of the earth is written there, and He calls us to read what He has written concerning it.

The whole world lieth in wickedness. Righteousness has fled; and, with righteousness, all peace and order. Kingdoms rise and sink, like the rising and sinking urges of the ocean. There is no stability, no compactness, no coherence, either in themselves, or with each other. Misrule, tumult, and change, are rocking them to and fro; the reins of government lie broken upon the necks of a hundred nations, either overstrained by the ruler, or cut asunder by the ruled. How is this to end? Prophecy alone reveals the consummation. Let us welcome so sure a light in this "dark place."

The Church is rent and feeble, with much of earth, little of heaven about her, to declare her high parentage and destiny. Few in numbers, with persecution as her portion, and sorrow as her heritage below, she passes the

time of her sojourning here in fear, breathing an atmosphere altogether uncongenial,—an Israelite in Babylon, hanging her harp upon the willows. Who shall tell what is to be the end of all this? Who shall foretell the issue of her pilgrimage, and the recompense of her sore oppression? The Lord himself has done it; He has forespoken the things concerning her in the latter day, and she is invited to contemplate these "glorious things."

Israel is in exile, scattered and bleeding, without a city, a temple, a home; she traverses the plains of earth, or dwells in its cities,—yet still an outcast, for whom no man careth, and with whom will share his honor or his influence, and to whom, in death, no man will build a monument. Her land is a desolation; her vineyards are trodden down; her cities are a ruinous heap. Is it always thus to be? Is there to be no restoration, no rebuilding for her? Has not God recorded "thoughts of peace" [Jer. 29:11] for her, in the appointed time? Let us search and see; prophecy alone can tell us.

Antichrist gathers strength. Like a specter from the abyss, he rises, overshadowing the earth, and going forth to write his name upon the forehead and the hand of his myriad worshippers. "Even now are there many antichrists" [I John 2:18], *each* of them like a demon from the pit, *all* of them banded together against the saints of the Most High. What is to be the career and what the end of these hosts of darkness, especially of their great head and captain? God has revealed the things concerning him, lest the hearts of His saints should fail. The same word of prophecy makes known his doom; swift and speedy as his exaltation. It is our wisdom to enquire what has been written concerning him. How shall the Church know her great adversary, and prepare for his onset, if she do not set herself to study the prophetic picture in which God is holding him up to her gaze?

Objections have, however, been taken to the study of the prophetic word, and Satan had done his utmost to give force and color to them. Fearing for his kingdom, and knowing how mighty a weapon the word of prophecy is against himself and his devices; especially

against the great *Antichristian* device in which all his craft and power are concentrated; he has labored to discredit such studies by connecting them with unsoundness in the faith.

It is certainly to be deplored that error and fanaticism have in some cases accompanied prophetic studies. God has been thereby dishonored, and His word profaned. The lips of scoffers have been opened in taunt, while timid believers have kept silence, as if unable to reply.

We need not keep silence. Let us admit the *fact* on which the mockery is founded, and there let it rest. It will humble us; it will inspire caution; it will teach us wisdom; but it will do no more. It will not deter us from such studies, nor will it lead us to impeach the Word of God for consequences in which man alone is the delinquent. It will not lead us to join in the fears of the over-prudent, respecting the perilous nature of these investigations, nor to relinquish the field as either impracticable, or barren, or injurious. Because visions of futurity, drawn *professedly* from Scripture, have, with unholy fire, kindled some burning fancies into the wilderness of a frenzied enthusiasm; because some who have soared to these unearthly heights have flung the past from their memory and the present from their consciousness, living the fervid expectants of a golden futurity, or the frantic denouncers of woes without name or number; are we, therefore, to shut up the prophetic record, and turn away our eyes from pages stamped so broadly with the seal, and encircled so brightly with the blessing of God? Are the prophets to be treated as if belonging to the kindred of the sybils [prophetesses], and their books to be buried out of sight? Nothing more profane has ever been uttered against Scripture, than that the study of any part of it is fitted to unhinge the mind, or raise its temperature beyond the point of calm and solemn enquiry. No Romanist ever promulgated an idea so indefensible as that any region of Scripture is unfruitful or forbidden ground, to be employed merely as a field out of which a casual text may be culled, as taste or fancy

may incline; that whole chapters and books of Scripture are wrapt in such studied mystery that the very endeavor to understand them betokens rashness and folly.

“Secret things belong to God” [Deut. 29:29], says an objector. Most certainly; and whosoever insists on prying into God’s secrets will only proclaim his own pride, and plunge himself into profounder ignorance. But prophecy is no secret thing; it is a thing revealed. It is not one of the things over which God has drawn the veil. It is just the opposite. It is that from which God has *withdrawn* the veil, on purpose that we may know it, and profit by it. The very name of the chief prophetic book is a declaration of this, and a call on us to “come and see.” What does *the Apocalypse* or *the Revelation* mean, but the book which reveals, the book which takes the veil or covering from the future, and presents the future to our gaze? Into what is not written may we not search, but into all that is written we may and must. Necessity is laid upon us. Yea, woe is unto us if we turn away our ears from the voice of God speaking to us concerning things to come. We are not, indeed, to be of those who add to the Word of God by their fanciful glosses or Talmudic reveries, yet we are not to be of those who “take from” its truths by refusing to study and interpret what God has set before us.

We hear much of the difference between things essential and things non-essential; but who will undertake to draw the severing line? Or who will venture to affirm that the prophetic portions of the Word are its non-essentials? Do not such truths as the advent, the resurrection, the judgment, form some of the chief scenes of prophecy? And are these non-essentials? Strange, that man should make such a division of the Word of God! Stranger still, that he should make it for the purpose of excusing himself for the neglect of so large and precious a portion of revelation. Is not the fact of its being revealed enough to show us that God thought it essential; or if not essential absolutely and with reference to salvation, at least essential relatively and as pertaining to holiness? If a man will persist in calling it non-essential, surely he will not

irreverently pronounce it *unimportant*? And if it be admitted to be *important*, then surely all farther argument is at an end. It *must* be studied. We dare not overlook or postpone the duty.

Never did we require such a light to guide our uncertain steps, and to guide our wavering faith, broken down with overflowing iniquity, sick and weary with the long disappointment of hope deferred. Never did futurity wear so wild an aspect, never did God's ways seem so strange and intricate, never were the Church's prospects more perilous and perplexed, or "the world's turn so slippery" as now. Above all, never was there a time when events developed themselves with such rapidity. This seems especially one of the characteristics of the last days. As the world moves onward, it appears to accelerate its speed, and precipitate itself with headlong recklessness and feverish haste. Events, alike the evil and the good, though specially the former, seem to ripen before their season, as if Satan were in haste to carry through his devices, knowing that now he hath but a short time. The crisis comes ere we are well aware of the commencement. Speed, whirlwind speed, is the order of the day. All things are now conducted upon a larger scale, and cast in a more commanding mould. There is less of the commonplace, and more of the startling; less of the gradual movement, and more of the sudden shock and convulsion in the events of the age—an age which is destined, we believe, to concentrate in its history more of the terrible and calamitous than has ever heretofore been witnessed, or shall be witnessed hereafter.

What, then, are our prospects? Some would paint them bright, others gloomy. All indeed are full of expectation as to the glory that is yet to brighten over the earth, the peace that is yet to gladden it. But as to what that glory is, how it is to be introduced, and how present events are making for its arrival, men are divided. The fond idolaters of science and reason are hailing the day of triumph, as if its dawn were already brightening in the east; as if, in the march of intellect, every one might discern the progress of righteousness

and truth. Some in the Church, not so unscriptural in their optimism, nor trusting so vainly to human intellect, see the gospel gradually leavening the world, and all things advancing onward resistlessly to their glorious issue. There are others, however, who see the shadows gathering deeper and broader everywhere, and darkness, denser than the Egyptian, settling down upon Christendom, and who look for no triumph till there has been a time of trouble such as never was nor shall be.

Which of these options is right, *prophecy* alone can inform us. This is our only guide. It is our watch-tower, into which we must betake ourselves, in order, on the one hand, to note the troubled scenes that are passing below, and on the other hand, to watch for every token of the ascending dawn. On the early morn of jubilee, men were stationed on the eastern hills about Jerusalem, to catch the first gleam of sunshine, silvering the cloud or the mountain-top afar off, that they might announce it to the priests, waiting in the temple, with their silver trumpets, to proclaim it to the expecting city, from which the tidings, caught up by the watchmen of the surrounding hills, were echoed from mountain to mountain till all Judea hailed the welcome note [Lev. 25:8-10]. So are we to take our stand on our prophetic watch-tower, that we may catch the earliest glimpse of approaching glory, and proclaim it over earth as glad tidings of great joy to a groaning creation, and a sorrowing Church. Woe be to us if we keep the world in ignorance of what is coming, so that when the day arrives, it may turn round on us in reproach, and say, "We never heard of all this; they who professed to know it kept silence; no utterance or warning from their lips ever reached our ears."

Viewing the subject even thus generally, we not only find strong reasons urging us to the study of prophecy, but we see also how profitable and how practical that study is. There are many circumstances, however, at present, fitted to call our keenest attention to its predicted scenes, and to invest them with a profounder interest. When the heavens are

gathering blackness, and the night is deepening its gloom; when the earth is laboring and convulsed, reeling to and fro like a drunkard, and every thing is out of course; when Infidelity, like some universal solvent, is dismembering and leveling the national and social systems; when every thing seems starting from its long-rooted base, as if gravitation itself had given way; when the Church is sore pressed and straitened, seeing traitors admitted within its camp, and the enemy's ranks augmented by desertions from its own; when Popery, Infidelity, and Liberalism, firm leagued together in well-pleased confederacy, are maddening against her with infuriated zeal; when the kings of the earth and the governments of the people are taking counsel together against the Lord and His Anointed [Ps. 2:2];—how intense the interest which the Church ought to feel in the “sure word of prophecy!” how earnestly ought she to take heed to it as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawn and the day-star arise [II Pet. 1:19]!

What, then, is the duty of every saint in an hour of darkness like the present? Is it to sit idle like the worldling, saying, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die?” Is it to sigh with the sentimentalist over the disastrous blight of this world's beauty, the wrecks of its ancestral might and glory? Is it to lament like the sensualist, because the new wine mourneth and the vine languisheth; or with

the merry-hearted, because all joy is darkened and the mirth of the land is gone? Is it to scoff with the infidel, saying, “Where is the promise of His coming” [II Pet. 3:4]? Is it with the panic-smitten statesman to grow pale with looking after those things that are coming on the earth? Or is it with a careless Church to say, “‘My Lord delayeth His coming’ [Mat. 24:48], why should I alarm or vex myself with such distractions?” No. But to give far more earnest heed to the one guiding lamp of Scripture; and, watching the parallel progress of event and prophecy, to mark the signs of the times, that she may be able to tell each inquirer “what of the night” [Isa. 21:11].

We are fallen upon evil days and perilous times. Iniquity abounds, and the love of many is chilled. And shall not this awaken us to watchfulness? Shall it not lead us to trim our lamps and gird up our loins? The storms that during the last half century have burst over the nations, wrecking the goodly fabrics of the olden time, have left us but a few remaining fragments; and as we stray along the shore in this the dull evening of time, marking their decaying remnants, we are filled with foreboding doubts of the future; and seeing the heaven still clouded, we cannot help believing that the storm is still unspent. Woe be to us, if it overtakes us unawares, and encompasses us in a moment with its fury, unsheltered and unprepared.

I MIGHT show you by scriptural evidence that the Jews will probably first be gathered in an unconverted state, though humbled, and will afterward be taught to look to Him whom they have pierced, through much tribulation. I might speak of the future glory of Jerusalem, after the Jews are restored, and the last siege which it shall endure: as described by Zechariah and by our Lord Jesus Christ. But I forbear. I will not travel beyond the bounds of my text [Jer. 31:10]. I think it is better to present its weighty promise to you in its naked simplicity. "Israel scattered shall yet be gathered." This is the future prospect of the Jew.

Now is there anything *contrary to this gathering in the New Testament*? I cannot find a single word. So far from this being the case, I find a chapter in the Epistle to the Romans where the subject is fully discussed. An inspired apostle speaks there of Israel once more "received" into God's favor, "grafted" and "saved" (Rom. 11:15-32).

Is there anything *impossible* in this gathering of Israel? Who talks of impossibilities? If an infidel, let him explain the present condition and past history of Israel, if he can; and when he has solved that mighty problem, we may listen to him. If a Christian, let him think again before he talks of anything being impossible with God. Let him read the vision of the dry bones in Ezekiel, and mark to whom that vision applies. Let him look to his own conversion and resurrection from the death of trespasses and sins, and recall the unworthy thought that anything is too hard for the Lord.

Is there anything *inconsistent with God's former dealings* in the gathering of Israel? Is there any extravagance in expecting such an event? Why should we say so? Reasoning from analogy, I can see no ground for refusing to believe that God may yet do wonderful things for the Jewish people. It would not be more marvelous to see them gathered once more into Palestine, than it was to see them brought from Egypt into the promised land. What God has done once, He may surely do again.

Finally, is there anything *fanatical or enthusiastic* in this expectation that Israel will be gathered? Why should men say so? Your own eyes tell you that the present order of things will never convert the world. There is not a church, or a parish, or a congregation, where the converted are more than a little flock. There is not a faithful minister on earth, and never has been, who has ever seen more than the "taking out of a people" to serve Christ. A change must come before the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord. A new order of teachers must be raised up, and a new dispensation ushered in. These teachers, I firmly believe, shall be converted Jews. And then shall be seen the fulfillment of the remarkable words, "If the casting of them away be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?" [Rom. 11:15].¹

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¹ J. C. Ryle, *Coming Events and Present Duties, and Prophecy*, pp. 115-117.