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Prison Ministry

**Prophets and Kings** (1917) Edition – Introduction – “The Vineyard of the Lord”

It was for the purpose of bringing the best gifts of Heaven to all the peoples of earth that God called Abraham out from his idolatrous kindred and bade him dwell in the land of Canaan. "I will make of thee a great nation," He said, "and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing." Genesis 12:2. It was a high honor to which Abraham was called--that of being the father of the people who for centuries were to be the guardians and preservers of the truth of God to the world, the people through whom all the nations of the earth should be blessed in the advent of the promised Messiah. {PK 15.1}

 Men had well-nigh lost the knowledge of the true God. Their minds were darkened by idolatry. For the divine statutes, which are "holy, and just, and good" (Romans 7:12), men were endeavoring to substitute laws in harmony with the purposes of their own cruel, selfish hearts. Yet God in His mercy did not blot them out of existence. He purposed to give them opportunity for becoming acquainted with Him through His church. He designed that the principles revealed through His people should be the means of restoring the moral image of God in man. {PK 15.2}

 God's law must be exalted, His authority maintained; and to the house of Israel was given this great and noble work. God separated them from the world, that He might commit to them a sacred trust. He made them the depositaries of His law, and He purposed through them to preserve among men the knowledge of Himself. Thus the light of heaven was to shine out to a world enshrouded in darkness, and a voice was to be heard appealing to all peoples to turn from idolatry to serve the living God. {PK 16.1}

 "With great power, and with a mighty hand," God brought His chosen people out of the land of Egypt. Exodus 32:11. "He sent Moses His servant; and Aaron whom He had chosen. They showed His signs among them, and wonders in the land of Ham." "He rebuked the Red Sea also, and it was dried up: so He led them through the depths." Psalm 105:26, 27; 106:9. He rescued them from their servile state, that He might bring them to a good land, a land which in His providence He had prepared for them as a refuge from their enemies. He would bring them to Himself and encircle them in His everlasting arms; and in return for His goodness and mercy they were to exalt His name and make it glorious in the earth. {PK 16.2}

 "The Lord's portion is His people; Jacob is the lot of His inheritance. He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; He led him about, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye. As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings: so the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him." Deuteronomy 32:9-12. Thus He brought the Israelites unto Himself, that they might dwell as under the shadow of the Most High. Miraculously preserved from the perils of the wilderness wandering, they were finally established in the Land of Promise as a favored nation. {PK 17.1}

 By means of a parable, Isaiah has told with touching pathos the story of Israel's call and training to stand in the world as Jehovah's representatives, fruitful in every good work: {PK 17.2}

 "Now will I sing to my well-beloved a song of my beloved touching His vineyard. My well-beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: and He fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a wine press therein: and He looked that it should bring forth grapes." Isaiah 5:1, 2. {PK 17.3}

 Through the chosen nation, God had purposed to bring blessing to all mankind. "The vineyard of the Lord of hosts," the prophet declared, "is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah His pleasant plant." Isaiah 5:7. {PK 17.4}

 To this people were committed the oracles of God. They were hedged about by the precepts of His law, the everlasting principles of truth, justice, and purity. Obedience to these principles was to be their protection, for it would save them from destroying themselves by sinful practices. And as the tower in the vineyard, God placed in the midst of the land His holy temple. {PK 18.1}

 Christ was their instructor. As He had been with them in the wilderness, so He was still to be their teacher and guide. In the tabernacle and the temple His glory dwelt in the holy Shekinah above the mercy seat. In their behalf He constantly manifested the riches of His love and patience. {PK 18.2}

 Through Moses the purpose of God was set before them and the terms of their prosperity made plain. "Thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God," he said; "the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto Himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth." {PK 18.3}

 "Thou hast avouched the Lord this day to be thy God, and to walk in His ways, and to keep His statutes, and His commandments, and His judgments, and to hearken unto His voice: and the Lord hath avouched thee this day to be His peculiar people, as He hath promised thee, and that thou shouldest keep all His commandments; and to make thee high above all nations which He hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honor; and that thou mayest be an holy people unto the Lord thy God, as He hath spoken." Deuteronomy 7:6; 26:17-19. {PK 18.4}

 The children of Israel were to occupy all the territory which God appointed them. Those nations that rejected the worship and service of the true God were to be dispossessed. But it was God's purpose that by the revelation of His character through Israel men should be drawn unto Him. To all the world the gospel invitation was to be given. Through the teaching of the sacrificial service, Christ was to be uplifted before the nations, and all who would look unto Him should live. All who, like Rahab the Canaanite and Ruth the Moabitess, turned from idolatry to the worship of the true God were to unite themselves with His chosen people. As the numbers of Israel increased, they were to enlarge their borders until their kingdom should embrace the world. {PK 19.1}

 But ancient Israel did not fulfill God's purpose. The Lord declared, "I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed: how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto Me?" "Israel is an empty vine, he bringeth forth fruit unto himself." "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt Me and My vineyard. What could have been done more to My vineyard, that I have not done in it? Wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? And now go to; I will tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down: and I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned, nor digged; but there shall come up briers and thorns: I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For . . . He looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry." Jeremiah 2:21; Hosea 10:1; Isaiah 5:3-7. {PK 19.2}

 The Lord had through Moses set before His people the result of unfaithfulness. By refusing to keep His covenant, they would cut themselves off from the life of God, and His blessing could not come upon them. At times these warnings were heeded, and rich blessings were bestowed upon the Jewish nation and through them upon surrounding peoples. But more often in their history they forgot God and lost sight of their high privilege as His representatives. They robbed Him of the service He required of them, and they robbed their fellow men of religious guidance and a holy example. They desired to appropriate to themselves the fruits of the vineyard over which they had been made stewards. Their covetousness and greed caused them to be despised even by the heathen. Thus the Gentile world was given occasion to misinterpret the character of God and the laws of His kingdom. {PK 20.1}

 With a father's heart, God bore with His people. He pleaded with them by mercies given and mercies withdrawn. Patiently He set their sins before them and in forbearance waited for their acknowledgment. Prophets and messengers were sent to urge His claim upon the husbandmen; but, instead of being welcomed, these men of discernment and spiritual power were treated as enemies. The husbandmen persecuted and killed them. God sent still other messengers, but they received the same treatment as the first, only that the husbandmen showed still more determined hatred. {PK 21.1}

 The withdrawal of divine favor during the period of the Exile led many to repentance, yet after their return to the Land of Promise the Jewish people repeated the mistakes of former generations and brought themselves into political conflict with surrounding nations. The prophets whom God sent to correct the prevailing evils were received with the same suspicion and scorn that had been accorded the messengers of earlier times; and thus, from century to century, the keepers of the vineyard added to their guilt. {PK 21.2}

 The goodly vine planted by the divine Husbandman upon the hills of Palestine was despised by the men of Israel and was finally cast over the vineyard wall; they bruised it and trampled it under their feet and hoped that they had destroyed it forever. The Husbandman removed the vine and concealed it from their sight. Again He planted it, but on the other side of the wall and in such a manner that the stock was no longer visible. The branches hung over the wall, and grafts might be joined to it; but the stem itself was placed beyond the power of men to reach or harm. {PK 21.3}

 Of special value to God's church on earth today--the keepers of His vineyard--are the messages of counsel and admonition given through the prophets who have made plain His eternal purpose in behalf of mankind. In the teachings of the prophets, His love for the lost race and His plan for their salvation are clearly revealed. The story of Israel's call, of their successes and failures, of their restoration to divine favor, of their rejection of the Master of the vineyard, and of the carrying out of the plan of the ages by a goodly remnant to whom are to be fulfilled all the covenant promises--this has been the theme of God's messengers to His church throughout the centuries that have passed. And today God's message to His church--to those who are occupying His vineyard as faithful husbandmen--is none other than that spoken through the prophet of old:

 "Sing ye unto her, A vineyard of red wine. I the Lord do keep it; I will water it every moment: lest any hurt it, I will keep it night and day." Isaiah 27:2, 3. {PK 22.1}

 Let Israel hope in God. The Master of the vineyard is even now gathering from among men of all nations and peoples the precious fruits for which He has long been waiting. Soon He will come unto His own; and in that glad day His eternal purpose for the house of Israel will finally be fulfilled. "He shall cause them that come of Jacob to take root: Israel shall blossom and bud, and fill the face of the world with fruit." Verse 6. {PK 22.2}

 From Strength to Weakness

"Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me, that I am the Lord which exercise loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord." Jeremiah 9:23, 24. {PK 24.1}

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