

[R2707 : page 300]

THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN.

– LUKE 15:11-24. – OCT. 28.

"I will arise and go to my father."

HAVING GIVEN in the foregoing parables of The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin, an outline of God's general dealing with the human family, our Lord now gave a third parable as illustrating God's special dealings with the people of Israel. He wished not only that his hearers should have the general illustration of God's goodness and care for the recovery of the lost, but now he would give a special lesson that would bring the matter close home to his hearers – both Pharisees and publicans – and show to all the real situation and the proper line of conduct for each to take.

It will be noticed in this connection, that while our Lord was known to be friendly toward sinners, he was never known to condone sin. The friendship of the publicans was not gained through our Lord's falsifying matters to them and claiming that they were not sinners; but on the contrary, by his declaring them to be sinners, by showing his sympathy and love, and that their case, so far from being a hopeless one, as the conduct of the Pharisees would imply, was hopeful, if [R2708 : page 301] they would but repent and turn to God. The "father" in the parable, represents Jehovah God, and the "two sons" represent two classes in Israel, the elder son representing Moses and the prophets, and all who "sat in Moses' seat," as representatives of the Law, with all who sought to conform their lives to its requirements, – Pharisees, etc. The younger son represents the remainder of that people Israel – the class which was inclined to wilfulness and waywardness as respects the divine Law.

These two classes, all Israel, were inheritors together of certain wonderful blessings and promises – the blessings being equally divided between them, but the promises remaining for those who would be faithful to the will of the Father. The elder son represented the class

which, having respect to the promises, enjoyed the blessings at home with the Father, that is, in fellowship with God as his people. The younger son represented the class which ignored the promises, took its share of present blessings, and departing from God wandered afar from him, in sin and disregard of the Law.

The latter class had anticipated much pleasure in the wayward course; but as a matter of fact found, as all transgressors do, that "the way of the transgressor is hard." And in this respect the sinner-class of Israel was no different from any other class of sinners at any other time living in violation of the known law; it is an attitude of want, of hunger, of dissatisfaction, discontent; it is a condition of slavery to sin and of receiving of sin's wages; – in the present life, wages of unhappiness, melancholia, heart-aches as well as body-aches. The parable represents this son as thoroughly disgusted with his condition, resolving to return to his father's house – not expecting to be an inheritor of the great promises, the rights to which were admittedly forfeited, but merely hoping to have the privilege of being admitted to the house as a *servant*, not hoping to be received as a *son*.

Our Lord thus illustrates the condition of some of the publicans and sinners hovering about him and listening to his teachings, respecting whose reception and instruction the Pharisees were finding fault. Our Lord would have them see the attitude of the Heavenly Father toward these returning ones, and in the parable pictured him as seeing the repentant prodigal a long way off, and as having compassion for him, and great willingness to receive him. How this must have touched the hearts of the publicans who heard, – to think that God was willing to receive them back again, not to spurn them as the Pharisees did! Our Lord proceeds with the picture further, to show that the Father not only received the prodigal, but, beyond his expectations, received him as a son, not as a servant, – providing for him a new robe of righteousness, and making for him a great feast of welcome.

Then, as illustrating the attitude of the complaining Pharisees, the elder brother is pictured in the parable as disappointed at the return of the prodigal brother. Thus our Lord revealed to them how different was their attitude of heart from that of the Heavenly Father; and thus he gently reproved them. The parable shows the attitude of the Pharisees in declining to call the prodigal "brother," saying, – "This *thy son,*" while the view of the Heavenly Father to the contrary is expressed in the words, "This *thy brother* was dead and is alive again."

The Pharisees and others of the Jewish nation who sought to keep the Law – to be faithful to God's requirements, were, so far as that was concerned, in the right attitude; and up to that time and point were heirs of all that God had promised, and had to give; and had they been not only outwardly religious but religious in heart also, they would have been fully prepared to have received at our Lord's hands the great blessings of the Kingdom privileges which, being in a wrong attitude of heart, they despised and rejected and lost. This their loss is represented in the parable by their refusal to go in to the feast made by the Father, to which they were as welcome as the returned prodigal, and in which feast, had they been in a proper attitude of heart, they would have had a prominent place with the Father in bestowing the welcome on the returned one. But as they were not in the right attitude of heart to receive their repentant brethren, neither would they have been in the right attitude of heart to be the Lord's instruments of general blessing in his Kingdom. He selects for joint-heirs with himself in the Kingdom, not the self-righteous, who despise others, but such as are of an humble heart, and who, receiving divine mercies and favors as a grace, are filled with thankfulness, and having the spirit of humility and of harmony with the Father, rejoice to cooperate with him in all of his benevolent plans for the recovery of the lost.

To hitch this parable on to the general theme presented in the two preceding, we might view the prodigal son as representing, in a secondary sense, all the remainder of mankind outside of those few in Israel who were seeking to do the Father's will; and from this standpoint

we can see that the feast of fat things provided for the sinners in Israel corresponds to the feast to be opened ultimately to the whole world of mankind under the Kingdom (Isa. 25:6), that all may return to the Father's house and that all who thus return will be received of God through Christ, not as slave-servants, but as sons.

The two preceding parables make no reference to the human will in the matter of the recovery of the [R2708 : page 302] lost; but this parable makes the human will very prominent. It was the *will* of the elder son which for a time kept him in the Father's house; it was the *will* of the prodigal son that led him forth, his wilful going into the depths of degradation not being hindered by the Father. Likewise, it was his own *will* that led him to retrace his steps to the Father's house; and it was only the *will* of the elder son that hindered him from entering into all the joys of the festal occasion with which the parable closes.

This parable also ignores the Second Death, and the class that will ultimately be cut off therein. The son that was lost, and subsequently was found, was lost in his going away into sin, and not lost in eternal torment. He was found in his return to God. He was dead, so far as the Father was concerned, when he was away; but he was alive again when he willingly returned.

The lesson to the Pharisees, in this parable, like the others, was in respect to their proper duties toward their brethren, who in receiving Jesus were showing evidences of a return to God. Indeed, so far as we know, few, if any, of our Lord's disciples were of the religious class of that time, who claimed to sit in Moses' seat, and to be in every sense of the word the favorites of the Father in that covenanted nation. That the Pharisees did not profit greatly by the parable seems evident: few from that class were willing to abandon their position of vaunted superiority, and to acknowledge that in everything they were wholly dependent upon the Father's grace, and of themselves could do nothing.

Some parallel to those conditions which obtained in the end of the Jewish age might be found now in the end of the Gospel age, even as

we have found that in every particular the Jewish people and their harvest time were a pattern or figure or illustration of the Gospel age and spiritual Israel. Amongst spiritual Israelites to-day, in our Lord's second presence, a message is going forth to the groaning creation, a message respecting the Father's love, and its lengths and breadths and heights and depths; a message respecting the ransom given by our Lord Jesus, that it was "a ransom for all," and that his death was "not only a propitiation for *our* sins [the Church's] but also for the sins of the *whole world*;" a message that the whole world, thus redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, is to have full opportunity of returning to divine favor during the Millennial age, "the times of restitution of all things, spoken by the mouth of all the holy prophets since the world began."

Now, how is this message received by nominal Christendom, as to some extent corresponding to the elder brother of the parable? Does it not appear that the message of restitution for a "groaning creation" (Rom. 8:22) is received in much the same manner that evidences of God's grace toward the Jewish prodigal were received? Does it not appear that many of our dear friends, whom we would have expected to rejoice to find the heavenly Father willing to receive back the repentant world, and that he has made full provision for their return to fellowship with himself through Jesus, and full preparation to let them all know of his grace in Christ, – does it not seem that this gracious message of "good will toward men," "good tidings of great joy to all people," should be to all Christians a gladsome message?

It surely should be such to all who have the Father's *spirit*; to all who love their neighbor as themselves. But we know how bitterly the message is rejected by some who, to outward appearances, have long been favored of the Heavenly Father, and who are well versed in his law, and who have been seeking to keep close at home, in the sense of outward obedience to the laws of righteousness. What would their course of conduct in respect to his message of present truth imply? Would it not imply that outwardly they had been sons of God, in obedience to the laws of righteousness, but that they had at heart been

far from him, even when with their lips they drew nigh unto him, and when they bent their knee in prayer to him?

Would it not seem that if they had the Father's spirit of love and kindness and generosity and justice and truth they would be glad, yea, rejoice exceedingly [R2709 : page 302] to know that after the selection of the Church of this present age to be the Bride and joint-heir with Christ in the Kingdom, the Heavenly Father had a great and wonderful plan of *restitution* for the world of mankind in general? If they had the Father's spirit, if they had the spirit of him who left the Father's glory and humbled himself to our conditions, even unto death, to be a co-worker together with the Father in the great work shortly to be accomplished for the recovery of the lost? It certainly should fill the Lord's "brethren" with joy to know that it will be a part of their privilege as members of the body of Christ to join with him in this great work of bringing back the lost sheep, of sweeping diligently and finding the lost coin, and, in every sense of the word, of welcoming back to the Father's house the lost brother.

It is not for us to judge the hearts of men; that is beyond our power; but the Lord seems to be using his truth in such a way that it shall become the discerner of the thoughts and intents of the hearts, and that, sharper than any two-edged sword, it shall separate, shall discover, shall manifest, who have the spirit of the Lord, and who have not his spirit. "If any man have not the spirit of Christ he is none of his." – Heb. 4:12.
