

CHAPTER TWO

THE USE OF PROPHETIC STUDY

WE believe that much of the present indifference to prophetic study has arisen from the want of *unity* among Christians. The “communion of saints” is neither known nor prized. It may be admired in theory, but the fellowship itself is little understood. The Churches sit apart, looking coldly, perhaps enviously, on each other. The desire for union, as hitherto expressed, has in it more of the sentimental than the scriptural. We seem to reckon ourselves merely individual possessors of a common faith; not living, sympathetic members of one body.

The result of this has been, that those parts of Scripture only have been studied which, as individuals, we could feed upon, while those portions which address the Church *as a body* have been neglected; and as prophecy especially addresses the Church corporately, not in fragments, its profit has been undervalued, and the study of it slighted. But let us be brought back to concern ourselves about the Church as a body, to shake off this false idea or feeling of isolation, to realize the communion of saints; then shall we begin to look about us for some inspired information respecting the character, the condition, the posture, the prospects of the Church. And so it has always come to pass, that, in times of trouble and persecution, when cast off by the world, and drawn together by the sympathies of a common interest, a common suffering, and a common hope, the eye of the Church has been turned to the prophetic page, and from it has gathered that strength and guidance which no other part of Scripture could so fittingly supply. At present we are too much at ease, resting securely in league, or at least at truce, with the world. Thus we forget our *common* interests, and think solely of our individual concerns. The prophetic

chart is thrown aside; the prophetic lamp is allowed to burn on unheeded. But should a day arrive when the world’s slumbering hostility shall awake and burn red against us, when our long dream of peace shall melt away, and darkness overcloud us; then shall we turn with no careless eye to the “more sure word of prophecy,” dwelling with deeper delight upon its glowing visions, longing more anxiously for the day of promised rest, praying more fervently for the shortening of the time of tribulation, the coming of the kingdom, and the arrival of the long-expected King.

And as unity in the Church would lead to the study of the prophetic Scriptures, so the study of these Scriptures would lead to still greater unity. Friends who dwell far asunder, with a continent, or perhaps an ocean, between them, have often agreed to gaze each night upon some bright star of the firmament, and have felt how much this tended to keep awake their warm affection, and to strengthen the tie that bound them to each other’s hearts. So the Church of Christ, fixing her eye upon the “bright and morning Star,” and keeping before her the hope of the glorious Advent, is strengthening the bonds of love between all her members. The steadfast contemplation of a common hope and a common inheritance, with the mutual converse of united hearts about the expected glory, cannot fail to draw together more closely the divided members of the body.

It has been sometimes strangely said, that such studies are unprofitable, and though some ought to give heed to them, yet Christians in general may find some safer and more useful employment. Prophecy is not designed for the mere gratification of curious men; it is the nourishment of part of our very

nature. We should be but half-fed without it. We are by nature as instinctively *prospective* as *introspective* creatures. Our eye was formed to glance forward with as intense and eager an interest into the uncertainties of the future, as to hold intercourse with past and present realities. We cannot help this. It is instinct. It may often be in a state of diseased extravagance, but still it is our nature. We cannot help our anticipative propensities any more than we can extinguish memory. We are formed to look into the future; and we feel that nothing can be more *natural*; for the sunshine or the shadows of that future are hastening on to us apace, and we shall soon be compassed about with them on every side.

Our picture of that future, then, must be filled up either with shadows—phantoms of our own creation—or with the revelations of inspired prophecy. We cannot help speculating and conjecturing, either to “cast the fashion of uncertain evil,” or to spread before us the vision of “scenes surpassing fable.” The past is all fixed and gone; the present may be restless, still it is within our grasp; but futurity is too full of our destinies to allow us to smile at its uncertainties. Every moment comes loaded with fresh arrivals from the unknown shore, compelling us to vigilant forethought; so that fear and hope must be utterly torn from our breast, and the future forbidden to cast forward its shadows, and hang out its portents, before we can lie down at ease, absorbed in present realities, and torpidly indifferent to all which that future may in a moment let down upon us from its mysterious and inaccessible eminences.

We speak not of the vain curiosity that would fain sink the insipid monotony of present duty in the restless anticipations of change and novelty; but that wise and needful concern about the future which our Lord did not condemn when He said, “Take heed; behold I have foretold you all things” (Mark 13:23); which Peter cherished when he said, “Ye have a more sure word of prophecy; to which ye do well to take heed, as to a light shining in a dark place” (II Pet. 1:19); and which the Old Testament saints exercised when they “searched what, or what manner

of time, the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow” (I Pet. 1:11).

Besides, the soul of man is not so narrow and simple a thing that the belief of one truth can mould it into the form desired. Every part, every principle, every faculty and feeling, must have truths presented to them precisely adapted to their nature and exercise, else they must remain undeveloped, or if developed, remain unsanctified. Our reasoning faculty must be addressed, or it must wither up by remaining uncultivated; and accordingly there is ample scope in Scripture for its energies to work upon. Our propensity for imitation, observation, and acquisition of experience must be addressed, and it is met by the graphic narratives of Old and New Testament history. Our finer and higher feelings must be touched, and, we have the poetic richness of seer and psalmist to attract and improve them. Our *prospective* propensities must be guided and molded, or else they will grow rank over fields of their own luxuriant but unhallowed creation; and the prophetic Word must be spread before us that these cravings may be sanctified. Most mercifully, most marvelously, has God framed His revelation, that by its largeness and variety, it may compass our whole nature, and adapt itself to every part of our being. We have not to cut down and contract the manifold instincts of our soul, in order to bring it into the likeness of Christ. We have not to strike off one affection, nor leave one desire to waste unnourished, so fixing ourselves in a state of unnatural constraint, and concentrating into a single point the various outgoings of our nature; but, on the contrary, every principle within is provided with a corresponding truth without, by which it may be controlled and purified.

If, then, we are to be wholly sanctified only by a belief of the whole truth, and if every truth neglected be so much injury to our souls, how can we palliate the guilt or slight the danger of those who willfully neglect one truth of God, one chapter of His revelation? To overlook any section of the Word of God,

is just to say either that we do not desire to be wholly sanctified, wholly cast into the Divine mould, or that that section of the Word is unnecessary for our holiness and transformation. To complain of obscurity in the prophecies is an attempt to palliate our own guilt by fastening blame upon the Scripture. To plead this fancied obscurity as an excuse for omitting their study, is strange obliquity of logic as well as of conscience. It makes the very circumstances which in everything else is deemed the strongest argument for doubling the intensity of thought and appliance, a reason for indifference and neglect in this. To say that these obscure parts cannot be so profitable as the rest, is to maintain that God has written difficulties in His Book which will not repay the labor of investigation, even when successful. Surely there is no part of revealed truth so unimportant as that we should grudge the toil of searching it out! And if "the testimony of Jesus be the spirit of prophecy" [Rev. 19:10]; that is, if HE be the theme and burden of all its visions; can we count any effort a toil which is put forth to understand that testimony?

How shall we look for "the blessed hope," if we know not from prophecy what that hope is? How shall we become pilgrims and strangers here, if we have not made discoveries of the inheritance which is incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away? How shall we prepare to meet the Bridegroom, if we know not what the prophets have forespoken concerning His arrival, and concerning the signs of His approach? How shall we put on the bridal dress, if we know not the dress, nor have heard of the marriage-supper of the Lamb?

The attitude of the Church ought to be one of watchful expectation. "What I say unto you, I say unto all, WATCH" [Mark 13:37]. "When ye see these things come to pass, lift up your heads; for ye know that your redemption draweth nigh" [Luke 21:28]. The expectation and watchfulness must be founded upon and regulated by prophetic truth; and how, then, is it possible that the Church can maintain her attitude, if she turn away from such a guide? How can she steer

her way amid clouds and billows, if both her chart and her compass be set aside as useless or unintelligible? The position of the Church, then, must be shifted, and her posture reversed, before she can withhold her vision from the future; or else she must be watching for she knows not what; a something which cannot be the object of any definite, substantial, soul-sustaining hope.

Is she not like some beleaguered fortress, round which stretch, gloomy and far, the hostile encampments of the prince of this world? It is well that she is conversant with all the tactics which her perilous post demands. It is well that she has the experience of many a siege to perfect her skill and discipline. Yet of what unspeakable moment to be put in possession of her enemy's schemes and counsels; to know the changeful progress and final issue of the long and exhausting conflict; to calculate upon every movement of the enemy; to understand well-feigned retreats, ambushes, and endless stratagems, not merely as practiced against each individual in her army, but against herself as a body; to stand upon her watch-towers, marking each distant sign, and comparing every event with her prophetic chart, to ascertain how near she is approaching the day which is to be the last of her struggles, the first of her triumphs; when the great Deliverer shall arrive, and when, upon the field of victory, she shall ungird the sword, the helmet, and the shield, to exchange them for the palm of conquest, the scepter of royal dignity and dominion.

Most Christians, we fear, content themselves with very vague and general views of prophecy. They have caught up some of the prominent statements of Scripture regarding the future; such as that there will be a millennium, a resurrection, and a judgment day; and with these, or very little more, they are satisfied. Here they consider that their prophetic creed ought to terminate. They shrink from all minuter investigation, condemning it as presumptuous, or at least refusing it as barren speculation.

With regard to such details of the future as we speak of, there are two sorts of inquiries;

inquiries into what God *has* revealed, and inquiries into what God has *not* revealed. As to the latter, I would hand them over freely and without scruple to the unsparing condemnation of all who love the truth. With these the student of prophecy has no concern at all. But so long as our investigations relate to the former only, so long as we in the clear path of duty, from which it is at our peril if we step aside. Nay, the very example of these timid friends refutes their own arguments. They have gone a certain way along the same path; and all that we want is that they should go a little further; but still only so far as the road lies open and as God gives light. We would not have them move one step beyond that. They have fixed, certain landmarks of prophecy; and all we desire is, that they should gather up the information that Scripture gives, in order to fill up the spaces between.

We know how sadly many are fettered with prejudice upon this subject, and haunted with the idea of the presumptuous nature of the study. But the fact of prophecy forming part of the Divine revelation is quite sufficient to satisfy us of the lawfulness, nay, the duty of studying even its minutest details. "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of the prophecy of this book" [Rev. 1:3], are the words of encouragement; and though we had not another such text in Scripture, that single one would be enough. The prejudice is as irrational as unscriptural;

for no one can maintain that the mere futurity of a thing renders it unprofitable, and stamps with the charge of rashness any attempt to investigate it minutely. Yet this is the only conceivable meaning of the objection. And if so, how foolish, how sinful is it, when calmly weighed! For the unlawfulness or unprofitableness of our inquiries into any such subject consists not in the matter being either past, present, or future, but simply in its not being revealed. It would be just as wise to bar all minute search into Scripture history on the ground of its being *past*, as it is to inhibit all minute enquiry into prophecy because it is *future*. The fact of God having revealed so many particulars regarding the future settles the whole question as to the duty of every believer to examine these. It is plain that no investigation, however minute, can be called presumptuous, so long as it restricts itself to what is written; nay, the more minute, the more accurate it is likely to be, and therefore more accordant with the mind of the Spirit. The presumption is all the other way. It is the presumption of closing the ear against the voice of God; the presumption of professing to decide how much of God's Word may be studied with safety, and how much ought to be neglected as mysterious and unprofitable.¹

¹ See Isaiah 45:11; Matthew 16:3; 24:25; Mark 13:23; Luke 24:25; II Peter 1:19; 3:17; Rev. 1:3; 19:10; 22:7, 10.