

→ † OUR BANNER. † ←

Vol. XVI.

MAY, 1889.

No. 5.

AMERICA'S HOUR OF PERIL.

BY THE REV. R. M. SOMERVILLE, NEW YORK.

Seek ye the Lord and ye shall live ; lest He break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, and there be none to quench it in Bethel. —Amos, v., 6.

Amos was a native of Judah. He was not born in the line of prophets, but was a herdsman and a gatherer of sycamore fruit, and it was while following the flock that the Lord called him into His service. His case furnishes an excellent proof and illustration of the fact that in every age special honor has been put on the laboring classes. The first verse of the prophecy fixes the date of his mission within the reign of Uzziah, King of Judah, and that of Jereboam, the son of Joash, King of Israel ; but at what points in the period which lay between the accession of Jeroboam in 825 and the death of Uzziah in 759, B. C., he began and ended his active ministry, we are not told. Nor does it matter. His language is clear, graphic, intense and often sublime, especially when he refers to the power and majesty of Jehovah. Listen, for instance, to the words : “Seek Him that maketh the seven stars and Orion and turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day dark into night ; that calleth for the waters of the sea and poureth them out upon the face of the earth. The Lord is His name.”

Sent out to rebuke the fearful sins that prevailed in Israel, Amos begins by enumerating the sins of six other nations and declaring the judgments of God on them. I suppose that he hoped in this way to arrest the attention and make a deeper impression on the minds of the people. If God must punish and even destroy heathen powers that have only the dim light of nature to guide them, how much more may we expect that He will punish, and it may be overthrow, nations that disregard His clearly revealed will and set at nought His rightful au-

thority. The truth that underlies this prophecy is that God is the Supreme Ruler of nations, as well as of individuals. If the kings of Israel were subject to Him who has on His vesture and on His thigh the name written King of kings and Lord of lords, this is no less true of human government to-day. The powers that be are ordained of God.

The verse before us is an earnest call to national repentance. I gather from the words three things that it becomes us to lay to heart.

First—The test of national greatness is not material prosperity, but a right relation to God. "Seek the Lord." This call was addressed to Israel at a time of great outward prosperity. In former years the nation had been subject to Syria, but Joash was successful in his wars with that oppressive power and his son, as we read in the history of his acts, "restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain." During the whole of his reign the royal household was a scene of unusual brilliancy, and there was immense wealth in all the land. If you read this prophecy you will find that it presents a picture of luxurious living that has seldom been paralleled in the history of the world. You will see elegant residences of hewn stone surrounded by pleasant gardens or in groves of fig and olive trees. You will see people lounging on couches of ivory partaking of extravagant feasts and listening to voluptuous music. The whole prophecy reveals a sensuous taste and the largest means of gratifying it; yet the nation was soon to be overthrown.

Before its downfall milder measures were tried, but in vain. We read of faithful warnings in the form of physical disasters; no rain, when there were yet three months to the harvest, so that the inhabitants of the cities are represented as wandering about in search of water, but not satisfied; then famine, then plague, but there were no signs of repentance, the record of each calamity closing with the solemn words, "Yet ye have not returned unto me, saith the Lord." An earthquake shook the country with such violence as to throw down the temple at Bethel, with its idols and altars, and many of the palatial residences in the vicinity. But this was not all. Jereboam died, and his son who succeeded to the throne was, after a brief reign of six months, drugged, or, in the expressive language of the Prophet Hosea, "made sick with bottles of wine," at a banquet, and assassinated under the direction of Shallum, son of Jabesh. This was the beginning of the end. Several times the Assyrian came down from the north till at last, after a siege of the most fearful character, in which mothers ate their own babes, Samaria was taken and the kingdom fell. I want you to notice that it fell because its rulers did not recognize the Divine authority, or, in the significant language of the sacred historian, "did evil in the sight of the Lord."

Here is a lesson for America. Our country boasts of extensive territories, the population is increasing with great rapidity, and there

is immense wealth in the land. But as the Secretary of the National Reform Association puts it in his circular to the churches, "it is beyond question that the foreign population crowding our vast domain will revolutionize our Christian institutions unless we make the government and laws of our country the citadel for their defense. Religious and moral sentiment must crystalize into the form of statutory law or it cannot resist the flood tide of open ungodliness and immorality that is sweeping in upon us." What this nation needs in order to give it vitality and strength is a right relation to God. If Christ is the Governor among nations, if it is the will of God, that all kings shall bow down to Him and all nations shall serve Him, and if the command to civil rulers is "Kiss the Son, lest He be angry and ye perish in the way, for his wrath shall kindle soon," the utter disregard for His law and authority that the secularism of to-day insists on must be displeasing to Him and perilous to the nation.

Second. When there is national disregard to the kingly claims of Christ the land is always filled with immorality. I am sure that no one can read this prophesy and fail to find many proofs of this statement. One sin that prevailed in Israel at that time was drunkenness. Amos represents the people as carousing in the temples of their idols and urging the Nazarites to drink in violation of solemn vows and so paralyzing their influence. You hear women calling for liquor, "bring and let us drink," and you see men using wine by the bowlful and thinking only of self-indulgence, and so showing an entire want of sympathy with God and His cause. And I need not say that intemperance is the curse of America at this hour. Of all the grievous wolves that enter in to spoil the flock of Christ this is surely the most pitiless and deadly. Ministers of the Gospel have fallen before this enemy and are living witnesses that neither "learning, nor position, nor solemn vows, nor the most dread responsibility will save a man if he tamper with that wine which is a mocker." There are some in the fellowship of the church, "not perhaps open drunkards, but indulging to such an extent that their moral perceptions are blighted, their conscience defiled, their influence in the family and in society vitiated, and the spirit of holiness grieved by their presence there." In this way many are kept away from the house of prayer and never hear the gospel, innocent children sharing in their sin and misery. If there is one fact that ought to be more deeply impressed than another on the followers of Christ it is that the drink system, which the laws of this State sanction and uphold, is the "main cause of the home heathenism that is extending through all classes of society, seemingly beyond the power of all evangelistic power to cope with." On one of the streets that the West Central Evangelical Alliance has undertaken to canvass a visitor found a family in destitute circumstances. The children were almost naked. In the corner of the room a few rough boards, laid on two broken boxes and covered with the poorest kind of mattress, form-

ed the bed on which husband, wife and infant lay at night, while the two boys crept underneath for shelter while they slept. This scene called forth a good deal of sympathy; and yet in that poor home there was some money to spare for liquor. In answer to the question, "Does your father ever send you for beer?" one bright eyed boy said, "Oh, no; papa goes for it himself." This is only one case out of many which show the spiritual ruin that drink is working among thousands on thousands around us and under the very shadow of our churches. Nor are the effects of the traffic limited to our own land. Its destructive influence goes with our commerce to the ends of the earth. In the beautiful valley of the Congo, with its 50,000,000 souls, it is working immorality compared with which the simple heathenism of the natives seems virtue. A speaker at the great missionary conference in London last summer told of an order for liquor to be sent to Africa that was accompanied with the additional order, "Send us some handcuffs." It is claimed on good authority that the natives of the Samoan Islands are being literally murdered by the importation of rum and fire-arms. And the liquor traffic is being carried on there to-day simply because the United States government refused to enter into an arrangement that all the other powers interested in had signified their approval of.

Another sin that Amos charges upon Israel is licentiousness, and this sin is invariably found where intemperance prevails. Do not the crimes, whose sickening details fill the columns of our daily press, and are sought after with such avidity, show that this same sin exists in American society?

Yet another sin marked the decline of Israel, and that was an insane desire to make money. Everything must bend to this desire. After referring, in the tenth verse of this chapter, to their "treading upon the poor" and "taking from him burdens of wheat," in allusion to the oppressive taxes or rents that were exacted that they might be able to live in elegant houses of hewn stone, the prophet says: "I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins; they afflict the just; they take a bride, and they turn aside the poor in the gate from their right." Do you tell me that this is not true of America? I have heard of Aldermen taking bribes. I have heard of officials running away with trust funds. I have heard of men standing well in business circles and in the church forging the names of friends. I have heard of corporations withholding the just wages of employes to swell the dividends of stockholders. Aye, with many all over the country, worldly gain is the ruling motive in every business transaction, the main spring of their commercial life, the one desire of their souls. "These things," says a living writer, "are evil not only in themselves, but in what they indicate. They are symptoms of disease in society, pustules on the body politic, which show that the nation's life-blood is impure."

In view of this I do not look for any permanence in existing social reforms until there is reform at the fountain head. In the eloquent words of the Secretary of the National Reform Association, "The only foundations on which they can rest is the rock of Divine authority, and the only scepter by which they can be maintained is the scepter of King Jesus."

Third. The only safety for a nation that has drifted away from God is immediate repentance. "Seek the Lord and ye shall live, lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph," another name for the Northern Kingdom, "and there be none to quench it in Bethel," no one to extinguish the fires that the Lord shall kindle in the places where men render to idols the homage that belongs only to Himself. The only hope of the individual is repentance. "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near." "Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts." "Let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." In like manner the only safety of a nation is repentance. Read, in proof and illustration of this, the case of Nineveh—a case that had no parallel in history. "So the people of Nineveh believed God and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth from the greatest of them even unto the least of them. For word came unto the King of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne and he laid his robe from him and covered him with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published in Nineveh by decree of the King and his nobles, saying, 'Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock taste anything; let them not feed nor drink water. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth and cry mightily unto God; yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands.' Who can tell if God will repent and turn away from his fierce anger? And God saw their works that they turned from their evil way, and God repented of the evil that he said he would do unto them, and he did it not." It was a mighty good thing for Nineveh that its King had not got the nineteenth century idea into his head that civil rulers have nothing to do with religion. It is a mystery to me how any reader of the Bible can fail to see that kings and judges of the earth are required to obey the law of Christ not only as individuals, but in their civil capacity and rule for His glory. To deny this is to lay the axe at the root of family as well as national religion; "while," in the language of Dr. Hugh Martin, "it would confine Christ to the separate consciences of individual men, it would refuse him the right to govern the household and communities into which they are combined. Its universal prevalence would prevent the fulfillment of the promise that the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of Jehovah and His anointed One."

O, that America would be wise in time. The only thing that can avert the judgments that threaten this land is "works meet for repent-

ance." The Lord reigns, and, if this nation would have true vitality and strength, it must be willing for Him to wear the crown. Taking, in this day of conflict with secularism a loyal stand on the side of Christ, it must cry, "Bring forth the royal diadem, and crown Him Lord of all."

PERSONAL OBLIGATIONS.

But what part have we to play in this matter? Are there any personal obligations resting on us? Yes; in the first place, it is our duty to do all that we can to keep the regal claims of Christ before the community.

The National Reform Association employs lecturers or District Secretaries for this purpose. They travel from one place to another, and on all occasions their message is, "Seek the Lord, and ye shall live." And what is the result? Where, in former years, there was ignorance or indifference, or prejudice, there is now cordial welcome extended to these devoted laborers and in many places an enthusiastic indorsement of the great principles that Christ is King of Nations and has a rightful claim to the allegiance of the State. If we are in full sympathy with this movement we will give liberally to its support, and there is a great need of money at this hour. Believing the principles that we advocate to be true and scriptural, patriotism, if there was no higher motive, should impel us to do all that lies in our power to enlighten the intelligence and quicken the conscience of the community. If we believe that the cross and the crown are inseparable we can say, even in the face of disheartening circumstances, with the great apostle, "Perplexed, but not in despair." I may be told that the friends of this movement are a feeble band, contrasted with the multitudes who favor the secular theory of government. That does not matter. On the morning of June 22, 1680, twenty men rode up the high street of Sanquhar and, after prayers and praise, their leader, Richard Cameron, read aloud from the market cross of that ancient burg a declaration deposing the reigning monarch as "having forfeited several years before all right, title or interest in the crown of Scotland." How childish, you say. Yet that declaration set in motion a series of political changes in the nation, and in 1688 the acts of Cameron and his loyal followers were repeated on a grander scale, and historians write it down as the "glorious Revolution." If some of our faint hearted Americans had lived in the persecuting times of Scotland, it is not impossible they would have counted it very silly in Argyll, Guthrie, Renwick and many others to expect to save their country through efforts that only led them to the scaffold or the stake, and yet, as every one admits now, it was the earnest contendings of these men that gave birth to civil and religious liberty. The fidelity of a few may avail to bring this nation to the feet of Christ.

Another thing that we can do is pray. There is a mighty power in prayer, and I would that we were more inclined to wield this weapon in the interests of national righteousness. It is to this that Paul calls us, when he said "I exhort, therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and for all that are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour." You remember the thrice-repeated prayer of John Knox, "Give me Scotland or I die," and he was honored to effect a mighty revolution in that kingdom and to leave the impress of his own mind and heart on its institutions. Many examples could be given to show that where the wisdom of Senators and the prowess of armies have failed, prayer has won the victory.

We cannot make the laws of our country, but we can pray for those who do. We can pray that those who fill official positions in the land may be men of sound religious principles, true and faithful men, who will be influenced at once by the fear of God and the love of country in the exercise of their authority. Here is something that every one can do: Old age, tottering on the top of its staff, can cry, "O, God! arise and plead Thine own cause." The mothers and daughters of our land can cry, "O, Lord! remember how the foolish man reproacheth Thee daily. Forget not the voice of thine enemies." And in this way they can exert an influence as far-reaching as the presence, and as resistless as the might of the King himself. One of the most hopeful signs of the times is the Christian character of President Harrison. How cheering in his self-reliant way to hear him say, "I shall be thankful for the prayers of the good people of this nation. If I am conscious of anything connected with the office I have been chosen to fill it is of a serious and settled purpose to do right, as light may be given me." Let the friends of Christ all over this land unite in prayer that he may have light and courage to do the will of God.

Finally, we must be personally loyal to Christ. He is a blessed King, and wherever He reigns blessings abound. "All power" is His primarily, not to destroy men's lives, but to save them. Be it yours and mine to cast ourselves at His feet; and as He lays aside the iron rod of wrath and reaches out the golden scepter of mercy let us rise up and sing, "Hosanna in the highest! Hosanna to our King." Blessing and honor and glory and power be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne and unto the Lamb forever and ever.