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THE MESSAGE OF JUDE

THE shorter books of the Bible have frequently suffered from neglect, not perhaps by scholars, but by preachers and the ordinary worshipper, who, indeed, may be so unfamiliar with even the names of the books, especially in the case of the Old Testament prophets, that he is unable to find them when called upon suddenly. So with the Epistle of Jude. It is almost unknown and unused except for the last two verses, which are recognised universally in the form not of Scriptural quotation, but as an ascription of glory: "Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen."¹ Yet on a careful reading, it is abundantly clear that this book has a vital message for our day, and indeed, for every time of crisis.

We gather from verse 3 of the epistle that Jude did not intend to write a book like this, for he says, "While I was making every effort to write to you about our common Salvation, I felt that I must . . . urge you to fight in defence of the Faith . . ."² In other words, he became aware that a crisis had developed in the affairs of the Church, a crisis which demanded his immediate action, and his initial and greater theme of the "common salvation" had to be laid aside, so far as we know, never to be taken up again. Centuries later we read that John Bunyan lay in Bedford Gaol about to write a Treatise on the Christian Life, when something gripped him and made him change his mind and give to the world the book known as *The Pilgrim's Progress*.³ We are not justified in assuming that Bunyan suddenly thought of an attractive title for his treatise and merely changed the form and method of presentation of his message, although it has been said that while Bunyan only changed his method, Jude changed his message. That, however, is inaccurate, for Jude did not deviate from the great message of the common Salvation and Faith. What he did was to stress the application

¹ Jude 24-25.

² *Twentieth Century N.T.*, Jude 3.

³ See Moffatt: *Commentary on General Epistles*, p. 215.

of it rather than the content; to give illustrations of the message in practice, and it is from these illustrations that we to-day may grasp not only the message of the "common Salvation", but the way in which the "Faith once delivered unto the saints" can deal with all those problems which men would fain think peculiar to the twentieth century.

I

What are these problems? What are the things that so easily beset us? And what, it may be asked, could a man like Jude, who lived nearly nineteen hundred years ago, know about them?

The people who attempt to answer these and kindred questions fall into three groups:

(i) There are those who maintain that our twentieth-century problems are, and must be, entirely different from those of the first century, and therefore Jude can have nothing to contribute to the modern world of thought or to present-day attempts to solve present-day problems. Thus they dismiss the whole matter. Of such a group, little can be said except that while it has dismissed Jude, its problems remain to be dealt with.

(ii) The second group consists of those who admit that some first-century problems have a strong resemblance to some of our problems, and they suggest that by study and comparison we may see parallels and discover some indication of how to solve our problems. In other words, the Epistle of Jude is a page of history, and we ought to try to learn from the past. Now it may be admitted at once that this group would get help if our problems were only intellectual; but then our problems are not merely intellectual—they are practical, they are matters of everyday life, and character, and conduct. It is not "helpful hints" that men need, but superhuman, divine power.

(iii) Thus we turn to the third group—the group of believers who are convinced that Jude lays bare not only powers and temptations which attacked the early Christians, but some of the things which eternally attack the soul of man, and are therefore living issues with this generation. They also find that Jude delivers that message which alone can overcome those things that beset us. They have avoided what is too

common a practice, that of divorcing eternal things from everyday life, and they strive to bring Eternity—God Himself—into that life, or rather to see the workings of the Eternal in things that are commonplace.

Arithmetic is arithmetic all the world over, and it cannot be said that Jewish arithmetic is different from Scottish arithmetic (with the first group); or that there are parallels and some hints may be got from one to help solve problems of the other (with the second group). It can only be said that "two times two equals four" is eternally true—true for all time. So with standards of conduct. Morality is not a changeable thing, and the problems which attack man's soul do not alter. Much has been made of the idea of a federation of the peoples of the earth to ensure a lasting peace; but we must not allow ourselves to be carried away to such an extent by human rhetoric that we forget the hidden rock on which all these ideas may be wrecked—that of the human heart, which, if it be uncontrolled, unrebuked, unredeemed, will spread a fatal poison in the world. It needs no effort of the imagination to perceive that the evils which confronted believers in Jude's day are with us still, just as strong, and just as powerful, whatever their shape and under whatever name they masquerade. The message of Jude is peculiarly appropriate, therefore, in that it deals with the eternal faith which saves the human heart, a message which he summed up in a verse too often ignored: "Mercy unto you, and peace, and love, be multiplied."¹

II

Commentators generally pass over this verse as part of the common salutation which appears at the beginning of most letters of the time, and proceed to the main body of the epistle. Therein they find themselves in difficulties when they attempt to discover what particular sects and false preachers existed. Jude seems not so much to describe these troublous movements as to condemn them, so that from his letter it is difficult, if not impossible, for us to identify the principles of the sects mentioned. Indeed, some would suggest that Jude ought to have outlined the main points of doctrine or practice wherein they differed from the Church, and which formed the ground of Jude's condemnation.

¹ Jude 2.

It appears to the present writer, however, that the mistake is not Jude's, but that of those who pass by the implications of verse 2 and so miss the message of the book. It may be that they write from the study desk rather than from the mission field, for any man who makes a study of the outpourings and ravings of the West Indian pocomaniac in his attempts to "get the spirit", of the Maranatha group or the Holy Rollers, or any of the countless "fancy religions" found in these islands, realises very quickly that these sects have no principles except such as can be stated in negative terms. The "sheppy" (leader of a native pocomania group), for example, must not be able to read—and this is probably based on the ancient idea that while God speaks to the white man in a book (the Bible), to the black man He speaks only in dreams and visions. This negative idea is found throughout all their teaching and practice. They are against the Church, against the ministry, against all forms of government, against anything they do not happen to like, such as educating the young and paying taxes; but especially are they opposed to carrying out the moral demands of the Christian Faith—the demands for self-control, peaceful living, sacrificial service. The movements which Jude dealt with appear to be of a similar character, and he could hardly set down the principles of movements so entirely negative; he could only condemn the evil effects of those who deny Christ. This epistle is not the only one which gains new meaning when read in terms of modern missionary experience.

Moreover, it can hardly be conceived that Jude, whose mind had been prepared for the great theme of Common Salvation, would use the words of the salutation heedlessly. Is it not far more likely that they were carefully chosen, and that the evils mentioned in the body of the letter were intentionally prefaced by the "mercy, peace and love", and intentionally followed by the ascription, "Now unto Him who is able to keep *you* from falling (into those very evils?) . . ."? In such a short epistle, there was no room for extra words, and without these verses, the whole letter loses its meaning for us, for the core of the Christian Gospel would be omitted. Whatever Jude intended, he never intended that to happen.

Without entering into the various types that were troubling the Church at the time, therefore, but remembering that Jude knew them, and that his readers understood references which

might be perplexing to modern readers, let us examine this practical Christian message.

III

If there is no real connection between this salutation and the letter proper, then it may be assumed that Jude was simply multiplying words; that instead of "mercy, peace, and love", he could equally well have used the phrase "grace, mercy, and peace", or more simply, "the love of God". But our contention is that the salutation was not merely a polite opening to the letter, and that the whole letter was intended to be practical. There is therefore laid on the reader a duty to find out why Jude said what he said, and to find out the modern application of his words.

It is generally admitted that in life man has a duty to three persons; and he stands in life in three different relationships. It appears also that it is these three relationships which Jude has in mind, for the sects are not only troubling God's Church, but they are upsetting the fellowship of the Christians, and the peace of mind of individual believers. The three duties and relationships are as follows: (i) Man's relationship to God, and his duty to God, (ii) Man's relationship to his "self" and his duty to that "self", (iii) Man's relationship to society and his duty to society. If we bear these in mind, in the order indicated, the following things become clear.

(i) What Jude says, by implication, is that man's relationship to God is not "love", for love exists only between potential equals. It is not "peace" for there can be no peace between man the sinner and God the righteous judge. The only relationship which can exist if man is to live his life is that of *mercy*. It is out of God's infinite mercy that man is saved by faith, and man's duty is to accept freely and without reserve that gift of "mercy". "Without Me ye can do nothing",¹ said the Master; without the mercy of God in Christ, man is useless and hopeless.

(ii) Then there is a man's own inner life. If he is to live happily, fully realising all the powers God has given him, he must be at *peace* with himself. He must not pity himself, else he is apt to become self-centred. His duty is to be at peace with himself, and that can only be achieved if man accepts the

¹ John xv. 5.

mercy of God. The restlessness, the disquiet, the turbulence of this age is due to the fact that man is not at peace with himself, because he is not conscious of the mercy of God; he has not accepted the gift of eternal life.

(iii) Man's duty to his neighbour is not to act the part of God, for that is to assume powers over our fellowmen which God has reserved to Himself. Nor is it to confer "peace" on society, for that too is a divine prerogative. It was first given emphatically by Christ Himself—"Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."¹ So Jude writes that man's duty to his neighbour is *love*, a love which issues from the peace which comes from accepting the mercy of God.

Man neglects that order of things at his peril, for if he is not inwardly at peace, balanced in mind and outlook, he will confuse love with sentimentality, service with interference, and in the strain of life will do more harm than good to society.

IV

The modern application of Jude's message now becomes clear. It is not the passing parade which is the problem, but the eternal temptations which beset the soul of man; the ideas, the forces which are undermining religion, and individual peace and our relationships one with another. In Jude's day there were those who distorted religion from freedom into licence, oblivious to the fact that freedom implies duty. There were unstable men, stirring up doubts and distrust, "raging waves of the sea",² "murmurers, complainers";³ Jude calls them; men without the knowledge of God; men not at peace with themselves; busybodies who confuse talking about evils with curing them! "Their mouth speaketh great swelling words."⁴ Even at the charity feasts there were those who acted selfishly. In other words, then as now, men took on the outward form of religion, but so twisted it that the true faith had no connection with their actual living. That danger is always with us, but more so when we have anti-God movements in our midst. Concerning those who frankly say they have no use for God, we can only pray that God may not take them at their word. For those who feel they can manufacture their own peace, as we watch their peculiar mode of travel, circular, always starting,

¹ Cf. John xiii. 34, 35.

² Jude 13.

³ Jude 16.

⁴ Jude 16

never getting anywhere, we may pray also. And continually we must remember at the throne of grace those who put their community, or their race or class or colour, in place of God; who appear to believe that peace can only come, and conduct is right only if it contributes to the material welfare of their particular race or group, forgetting that God is not manufactured by collecting the ideals of men and women; that standards of conduct are not achieved by imitating the actions of men who at best are sinners and all liable to make mistakes.

Jude was essentially right in putting the peace of the individual before the love of the community, and before all putting the mercy of God, for he recognised that the eternal problem is the human heart; that our faith in the revealed will of God is the only unchanging standard of conduct; that our relationship with our inmost selves and with the community ultimately depends on our relationship with the Father of Mercies and the God of all Comfort. Beginning with such a sincere desire, with such a grip of essential things that he could in a few words cover a multitude of diverse sects and false preachers as is suggested in the body of this epistle, it was only fitting that he conclude with that glorious ascription: "Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and evermore. Amen."

JOHN W. KILPATRICK.

*Aberdour,
Fife.*