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Gordon, D.M.

Sermon.

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SERMON

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BY THE

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Chaplain to the Society.

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SERMON.

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"Righteousness exalteth a nation."—PROVERBS XIV ; 34.  
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There are three reasons which may justify, and may sometimes demand, the formation of "national" societies in a colony, or indeed in any foreign country. These are: first, that the men who are far from the land of their birth may meet for the mere pleasure of mutual encouragement and fellowship; second, that they may unite for the relief of their distressed fellow-countrymen; third, that they may strive to foster in the land of their adoption the principles which may have given greatness to the land of their birth. Upon Scotchmen each of these motives may rightly exert an influence. With keen enthusiasm they may recall scenes in the land they have left, and enjoy a pure pleasure in the fellowship caused by their common love of country; ever ready to relieve distress, they may lighten the burden of life for that small portion of their fellow-countrymen that are forced to ask the aid of charity; while from Scottish history they may learn what those principles are which give true greatness to a nation, and which they should seek to foster in the land of their adoption. It is to some thoughts connected with this last consideration that, for a little, I ask your attention. No truth seems to be more clearly illustrated by Scottish history than that which we have selected from the words of the wise monarch of Israel as the subject of our present remarks; and the Scotchmen, or descendants of Scotchmen, who are true to the teaching of Scotland's history, and who love the land they live in, will seek to promote in that land the righteousness that exalteth a nation. Time will only permit me to indicate very roughly and briefly some lines of thought which may tend to illustrate the truth before us.

I. We may see it, for instance, *in the light of the likeness which holds between the life of a nation and the life of an individual*, for the life of a nation follows the same laws as the life of a man. A nation, like a family, is something more than a mere collection of individuals; it is a corporate unity, whatever be its form of government. The citizens are the members of a living body, united in the brotherhood of a common national existence; the disease or health, the virtue or vice of any has some influence on the other members; there is a national life, to which each contributes, and by which each is affected. We use no mere figure when speaking of the national mind or the national conscience, for a nation may throb with keen intellectual enquiry, or be thrilled with anger, hope, or fear; it has the power of performing national virtues or of committing national sins, for which it may be visited with national rewards or punishments that should rouse it to feelings of national thanksgiving or penitence. Though the average lifetime of man may be but a short season in the existence of a nation,—though it may require many years, or even centuries, for a people to rise into spiritual or temporal prosperity, or to sink into degradation and decay, though the nation moves more slowly, and, as it were, in a vastly wider orbit than any of its members, yet it is clearly evident that the life of a nation follows, in the long run, the same laws as the life of a man. In both energy and labour win success; in both licentiousness is followed by weakness and shame; in both virtue will give influence; and vice, however accompanied, bring ruin and decay.

As it is easier for us to see the working of these laws in the life of a man than in that of a nation, we can illustrate the one by the other; doing so, we may see that just as surely as righteousness exalts a man, so surely must it exalt a nation. Common experience proves that it is so in the life of a man, for no other power save righteousness can give true dignity. Wealth cannot, for it is not in the abundance of what he *has*, but in the abundance of what he *is*, that a man's life consists. Often, instead of conferring dignity, wealth gives rise to pride and self-indulgence; and though a man be surrounded by all the

comforts, and be honoured by all the attention of equals, and the obsequious respect of inferiors, which wealth can procure, beneath it all there may be a debased and selfish spirit, while we feel that any true nobility of soul possessed by a rich man is always independent of his wealth. Mere intellectual culture cannot confer true dignity, though it does indeed bestow a glory which material wealth can never give. Brilliant wit and dazzling genius may enable their possessor for a time to shine in society, but if powers like these be divorced from moral excellence they most commonly become tinged with cold scepticism or unfeeling satire, and degrade the man who has them by making him profane, irreverent, and devil-like, when he turns these gifts against the Giver. Rank and high social position cannot truly exalt a man, for high office only degrades him who occupies it unworthily. Righteousness, true moral and spiritual worth, the power of always seeing the eternal distinction between right and wrong, and cleaving at all hazards to the right, this, and this only can give true dignity to any man ; and while it can enhance the charms of wealth, or rank, or intellect, it can, by its own power, confer a patent of nobility independent and superior to them all. It exalts a man's own nature ; and without this he cannot continue exalted in the opinion of others. Sooner or later the world casts off the men who have no moral worth to claim its respect ; for a time we may be dazzled by wealth, or rank or genius, but those who possess the most permanent hold on the world's heart, those whom it enshrines in its tenderest devotion, are the men who have been exalted by righteousness.

And, as with the man, so must it be with the nation. It is not by the abundance of its material wealth, nor the busy stir of its manufactures, nor the extent of its commerce, that a nation is made great or secure ; if there is no soul of honor inspiring it, nor moral excellence possessed by it, its wealth cannot save it. High intellectual culture cannot exalt it, for the keenest speculation and enquiry have often failed to give firmness and security to a nation, and have been found among those that were tottering towards decay. Nor can the "claims of long descent," ability to look back to vanished generations

of heroic ancestors, maintain a nation's dignity ; otherwise the ruling kingdoms of the world would be those that ruled of yore, which fell simply because of the decay of the righteousness which had raised them into power. However staple may seem the foundations laid by a nation's material wealth ; however brilliant may be her appearance among the kingdoms caused by the charms of intellectual culture, of eminence in literature, science and art ; however pleasing it may be for a people on turning the page of history to find that their land has been renowned for centuries, yet, as with the man or the family, so with the nation, righteousness alone can give honor or security. She may enhance the charms of the material treasures, the intellectual culture, or the honorable history of a nation ; she will in many cases develop these, for the truth admits of universal application, to nations as to individuals, that "length of days is in her right hand, and in her left hand riches and honor ;" and the nations that seek above all things the glory which she confers, will find that she will exalt them, that "her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace."

II. Again ; *God will exalt the righteous nation.* He reigns among the nations of the earth, and the people who seek to know and to do His will, shall enjoy His favor and be upheld by Him. There is no false tendency of the present age more common than the attempt to exclude God, as it were, from all active control of His universe. Some think of the material world as simply under a realm of law, constructed by its Creator like a machine that is wound up and set for a certain time, and now utterly independent of His care. They think of their own lives, either as the result of blind accident, or of their own exertions, or of both combined, as if no Higher Power was ever dealing directly with them. In like manner they think of the rise and fall of nations as the result of certain tendencies, the operation of certain laws, without acknowledging that there is a Hand holding the helm of the world's history, a just and loving Being overruling it all for His own wise ends, dealing with the nations as with each individual man, in perfect justice and in perfect love. But while God has appointed His laws in the material universe, they only express the way in which He acts.

Apart from a living agent there can be no action in mere material things, and every movement in the world around us bears witness to the supporting power of the ever present God. While He has appointed His laws for the regulation of human life, while He gives to each man a certain power of action, yet all must sometimes admit, and the Christian will gladly acknowledge, that the living God rules over each individual life. And so, too, in the life of nations. They do not move blindly on, rising or falling by any accident ; they are led by the King of all the earth. It is in fulfilment of His will that—

“ Through the ages one increasing purpose runs,
 And the thoughts of men are widened with the
 process of thēsuns.”

Even though̄ the nations are left to the operation of God's natural laws, yet, over and above the law, they have to do with the unseen Law-giver himself, as surely as any individual man has to do with God or God has to do with him.

Moreover, God has given us one striking example of the way in which He deals with nations, in the history of His dealings with the Jews. He specially educated that nation, that He might “do most good to all by preparing the world through it for the coming of Christ,” in whom His reign over every nation should be finally and forever acknowledged. In their history, as recorded in the Old Testament, we have not only the record of the events which befel them, but we have these events shown in relation to God's plan and purpose towards them. We find there that what God required of them was, above all things, *righteousness*, the faithful performance of His will as He was clearly revealing it to them. He sent His prophets to them, men who lived as “seeing Him who is invisible,” who came to king and priests and peoplē denouncing doom against them if they continued to rebel against their heavenly King. He taught them that material strength and worldly wisdom could be overcome by Him, as when the besieging

forces of Assyria were destroyed, or the grasp of the Egyptians was relaxed, taught them that it was *not* true that "Providence always fights on the side of the strongest battalions." He condemned their sins and promised punishment, such sins as He punishes in any individual, idolatry, falsehood, idleness, drunkenness, sensuality ; He taught them that, however long suffering He might be, He could not tolerate wickedness, and that for their sins they must either repent or perish. He taught them, and, through their history, He teaches other nations that sin brings punishment and decay, and that "righteousness exalts a nation."

And God's dealings with the Jews were but an *example* of the way in which He deals, and has always been dealing, with other nations. They were, for special purposes, a chosen race and a peculiar people, but His having selected them from the nations of the earth for a particular work by no means implies that He had nothing to do with others. The very record of the early dispersion of mankind testifies to the fact that those scattered children were acknowledged by God as belonging to His family, while, ever and anon, through Old Testament history we have brief glimpses of the way in which the King of heaven and earth was dealing with the heathen ; how, e:g; Egypt, Assyria, and Persia were used by him for special purposes, and led by Him through special experience, and had, at times, His will revealed to them by His prophets. The good which appeared among them was due to His guidance ; the vigor and prosperity they enjoyed were owing to their fulfilment of the righteousness that they knew, while all their evil and their disasters came from rebellion against His will, in so far as He had revealed it to them. Nor has God's rule over the kingdoms of the earth ever, for one moment, ceased. He has never, at any time, withdrawn himself from the sphere of human activities into some distant heavens. He still leads the nations of the world, often by ways that they know not of, still employs them for the fulfilment of His purposes, dim and mysterious though these may sometimes seem to us. He still punishes iniquity and rewards obedience ; still, as of old, he carries out impartially the decree of which He

gives so clear an example in the history of Israel, that "righteousness exalteth a nation."

III. Once more, we may find proof of our text by *an appeal to history*. We can find examples of the truth here taught us not only in the history of the Jews, which clearly reveals God's dealings with them, but in the history of other nations, ancient or modern. Doubtless, our views of a nation's history may often be moulded by preconceived opinions, and the lessons it seems to teach us may depend on what we wish to learn from it. Some writers have looked on the facts of history with theories ready formed, and if the facts did not agree with the theories, so much the worse for the facts. Yet surely any man, who is willing to admit God's dealings in his own life, can see proofs of God's dealings in the lives of nations. The slightest acquaintance with ancient history may suffice to show us that when the kingdoms of ancient Greece and Rome began to lose the elements of righteousness that were in them, when they failed to prefer right to wrong, and virtue to vice, when intellect yielded, as Gibbon says, "with a smile or a sigh," when wealth brought corruption, and the fibre of moral hardihood was weakened, then their decay was ensured. The same lesson has been taught us by the history of the nations sprung from the Latin race. Italy, Spain, and France have all given evidence that it was when their virtue gave way to self-indulgence, and the national vision was clouded to the difference between right and wrong, that weakness and shame befel them. And, on the other hand, to cite but one example of the contrary, one which is dear to each of us, it is just because of the extent to which she has preserved true righteousness that Scotland has maintained a place of power among the nations. The one great epoch in her history is the Reformation; before that she had little or no influence among the nations; but, three centuries ago, there arose one who kindled the nation's life in the noblest of all causes, who roused his country into moral earnestness and into firm adherence to truth and right, and who was, under God, the chief instrument in awakening and securing that which has exalted Scotland among the nations. Knox, as has been well said, is "the one

Scotchman to whom, of all others, his country and the world owe a debt."* Though men, enjoying the fruits of the victory which he won, have presumed to find fault, though they have often failed to see the almost woman-like gentleness that was joined with his fearless integrity, he stands out upon the canvass of the past as the one figure that his land should love to honor. And the righteousness that was aroused by the Reformation permeated like life-blood through the people. It called forth men that could bear witness to the truth and not fear to die, it cast them in an iron mould such as would fit them for their labors ; it nerved youths and weak women for martyrdom, and secured the priceless boons of civil and religious liberty. It gave new purpose to life, new dignity to labor, new attractions to literature and science, and, as Scotchmen went forth to other lands, and as the truths secured in Scotland were felt in other countries, it spread new life throughout the nations to the glory of God and to the good of man.

There are times when the language of simple narrative is the strongest eulogy, when words of truth require no coloring to make them words of praise. We feel this in reading the eleventh chapter of the epistle to the Hebrews, with its grand and simple muster-roll of eminent Saints of God. We feel it in some historic records, as when we read the unvarnished truths of the deeds that gave fame to Thermopylæ ; very strongly we feel it as we read of the martyrs who, in Scotland, bore witness to the truth, who, by their own self-sacrifice, secured for their nation the glory she will maintain as long as she maintains the martyr spirit among her people.

There are many reasons why a Scotchman may glory in and love his country. He may do so on account of her scenery of surpassing grandeur ; her hills whose outlines become to you like the faces of old familiar friends, her glens and streams, wild moors and fertile straths, have been felt, even by strangers, to rouse a sympathetic response to the question ; "Where is the coward that would not dare to fight for such a land ?" He may glory in his country because of the long roll of her warriors, men who held life cheap compared with civil and

* Carlyle ; "Lecture on Heroes."

religious liberty, and who, on many a foreign field, maintained the honor of their land, men "whose names the world would not willingly let die." He may glory in her because of her poets and philosophers, who, by "thoughts that breathe and words that burn," have helped to lead the world onward to the golden age that awaits it. He may love her for the memories of days that are gone, when in childhood he sported by the burnside and among the daisies, or, in ripening youth, was closely linked with those from whose spirits oceans and continents now seem powerless to sever him. Or, with a calmer glory and a more tender love, he may turn in memory to the quiet kirk-yard where rest the remains of his dear and honored dead. But though for such reasons as these he may justly love and glory in the land of his fathers, yet all these glories grow dim by reason of the glory that excelleth. It is because of the witness she has borne to God's truth among men, and the power she has had in moulding earth's kingdoms for Christ, it is because of this honor that the God of Israel has given her, and the righteousness by which He has exalted her that "her very dust to him is dear."

Scotchmen and descendants of Scotchmen, who look with pride to the land of your fathers, be it yours to cleave as they did to the righteousness that alone can exalt a man or a nation. Led by their spirit of devotion to God, animated by their strong love of country, be it yours to spread in this land of your adoption the principles of those who made Scotland great. While we have a heritage from the past, we have a work for the present; while we rejoice in the memories of the land of our fathers, we cannot forget that our first duty is to the land that we live in. We shall be faithless to the teaching of Scotland's history and shall become "degenerate sons of noble sires," if we content ourselves with the admiration of departed greatness and fail to extend the spread of present goodness. O us God lays the honour, to us He gives the privilege of seeking to advance in Canada, that firm devotion to the will of God which has exalted Scotland. It is not merely nor mainly by the material prosperity of our land, though it be rapidly increasing, nor by our connection with an Empire that is famous in history, nor by any wisdom of legislation, nor by the growth

of intellectual culture, but by righteousness that our land can be exalted among the nations. It is by the increase of this, and this only, that we, as a people, can secure permanent prosperity; and this only can we contribute, as a nation, to lead the world onward to the time when God's loving rule over the earth shall be fully complete and revealed, when "the kingdoms of this world shall become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever."

MAR 27 1931

