

“If the Foundations be Destroyed, what can the Righteous do?”

There are those who suppose that because it is written, “by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph 2:9), the call to discipleship is not a call to work. That belief alone may save a man, without any exertion of effort or labours on his part. They believe that the Master has done all the work required, and that Yahweh is satisfied with the travail of his soul alone. But to suppose such is to take hold of part of a principle, and treat it as a whole. It is palatable to the flesh to suppose that men can be saved with no personal effort, for slothfulness and indolence are things that many incline towards. Even the thought of labour is a weariness to some, and therefore whilst they have the bread of life in their hands, they become too slothful to exert the necessary energy to bring it to their mouths.

The whole counsel of God, is that whilst it is perfectly true to say that men cannot earn salvation by works, and therefore boast of an entitlement to it, it is also true to say that men who have faith must show that faith in the things which they do. So it is written:

“a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils (daemons) also believe and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?” (Jas 2:18-20).

Applying these words to the matter in hand, we find that those who would counsel us that no work is required of those who desire to be justified by faith advocate a dead, demonical faith. True, they may have faith; but that faith will do them no more good than belief in One God helped the demon with which Legion was possessed; for it was plunged into the deep with a swinish multitude. The faith that saves is an active, living faith. And as in all things natural life is seen in movement and activity, even so a faith that is alive is plainly demonstrated to be such by works in obedience to the Will of the great redeemer. Without such activity, although a man may yet have a name that he lives; in the final accounting of things, he will be found to be, in fact, dead.

WISE AND FOOLISH LABOURS

The call to discipleship then, is a call to work. It is a call to manifest belief by activity - not that through those works salvation can be earned - but rather that through action, a living faith can be displayed. So it is, that in the New Testament portion of our readings for today, the Master presents to our minds two contrasting responses to those who hear – and evidently believe – his words; one who hears and does, and another who hears and does not do.

“Whosoever cometh to me, and heareth my sayings, and doeth them, I will shew you to whom he is like: he is like a man which built an house, and digged deep, and laid the foundation on a rock: and when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently upon that house, and could not shake it for it was founded upon a rock.

But he that heareth, and doeth not, is like a man that without a foundation build an house upon the earth; against which the stream did beat vehemently, and immediately it fell; and the ruin of that house was great” (Luke 6:47-49).

In these words, we have before us two types of work; that of a wise man, and that of a foolish man. The wise man is working, and labouring upon the basis of that which he has heard from the mouth of the Master. He gives ear to what is said, and acts upon it; and in so doing, he builds upon a firm foundation for himself that can never be moved. It is a foundation not of his own making, but one laid before him – a Rock. He found, and saw the rock, and chose to build upon it. That is, he heard the words of Christ, believed in their ability to sustain him in times of difficulty and adversity, and he laboured upon the foundation of strength

that those words provide. For such an one, Yahweh is his strength; He is a refuge from the storm, and a help in times of need. He will never be moved.

The foolish man, on the other hand, chose to build his house upon a different type of material. Not giving heed to the stabilizing influence of the Master's words, he chose instead to erect his edifice upon the movable and ever-changing sands of human wisdom and philosophy. That is, he built upon the basis of the flesh; a basis that is easier to work with, and dig into for the short term perhaps, but one that can never last. Though he may have built a grand and magnificent edifice, beautifying it with untempered mortar so that all those around him would hold it in great esteem and admiration, it could not survive the sweeping storm. They supposed that within the house that they had erected, there would be peace – yet by the force of an overflowing shower, great hailstones and a stormy wind (Ezek 13:11), it fell – and great was the fall of it.

This well-known parable of the wise and foolish builders illustrates a fundamental principle of Scripture, expressed elsewhere thus: “Except Yahweh build the house, they labour in vain that build it” (Ps 127:1). The foolish builder constructed a house entirely of his making, upon an unstable foundation. It was independently his, and it fell under the weight of itself, its weak, sandy foundations being unable to sustain it in times of adversity. However, there was a divine element to the wisely built house. The wise man was not building independently, but was a fellow-labourer with God, inasmuch as the completed structure contained elements of his labour and that which God had given. The Divine element was the foundation; he was building, as Paul expressed it, “upon *the foundation* of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord” (Eph 2:21).

The edifice referred to in this place is the ecclesia, erected in the first instance under the labours of the Apostles, upon a Divine foundation, with Yahweh's blessing. Thus, Paul says elsewhere, “we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building. According to the grace of God which is given unto me, *as a wise masterbuilder*, I have laid the foundation and another buildeth thereon ...” (1Cor 3:8-10). Paul, as a wise builder, built upon a Rock. He erected the House of God upon a firm, immovable foundation.

The Master spake also of the foundation of his House: “*upon this rock I will build my ecclesia*; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Mat 16:18). Though stormy winds may rise against it, though rain may beat upon it, and the floods of ungodly men may seek to destroy it, it shall remain and never be destroyed. The gates of death shall never prevail over it.

IF THE FOUNDATIONS BE DESTROYED ...

In our opening citation, the question is posed, “If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Ps 11:3). But this immediately brings to mind further questions: - How can the foundations be destroyed? If the gates of hell cannot prevail upon the edifice; how can anything bring about its ruin?

The context supplies the sense. The background of this Psalm would appear to be the flight of David from king Saul, who sought his destruction:

“In Yahweh put I my trust: how say ye to my soul, Flee as a bird to your mountain? For, lo, the wicked bend their bow, they make ready their arrow upon the strong, that they may privily shoot at the upright in heart. If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Ps 11:1-3).

Saul, being of the tribe of Benjamin, was proficient in the use of the bow (1 Chron 12:2), and he sought to destroy David, the upright in heart. Indeed, he attempted to drive David from Yahweh's inheritance, to flee to another place where he would no longer be a hindrance to the king. But why should such an one as David flee as a bird away from His nest? He trusted in Yahweh – why should he flee from his inheritance? So he answered Saul: “If Yahweh have stirred thee up against me, let him accept an offering: but if they be the children of men, cursed be they before Yahweh; for *they have driven me out this day* from abiding in the

inheritance of Yahweh, saying, Go, serve other gods ... the king of Israel is come out to seek a flea, as when one doeth hunt *a partridge in the mountains*" (1Sam 26:20).

Whereas previously, the Israelitish *Kosmos* was founded upon the precepts and laws of Yahweh, Israel's first king had corrupted himself. He disobeyed, and led the people to disobey the words of the Most High, by seeking to retain the riches of the Amalekites for their own use. Whereas Moses was faithful in all his house (Num 12:7), Saul sought to undermine the basis upon which the nation was founded, introducing the element of human lust and avarice - and thus set all the foundations thereof out of course (cp Ps 82:5). So the rebuke came: "thou hast rejected the word of Yahweh, and Yahweh hath rejected thee from being king over Israel" (1Sam 15:26). Saul attempted to alter the foundation of his House by introducing elements of rebellion, and rejection of the commandments of Yahweh; and he was rewarded accordingly. No longer building upon the Rock of Israel, his fall was great at the hand of the Philistines. Or as David expressed it: "How are the mighty fallen!" (2Sam 1:19,25,27).

INTERNAL DAMAGE

The foundations therefore, can only be set out of course by the builders themselves. Though the gates of hell may war against the House, they shall not prevail if it is founded upon a firm Rock, but if the builders set the foundations out of course by altering them, they only have themselves to blame when they fall – Saul being a case in point. But in such circumstances, what should the righteous do? What was David to do? Should he flee as a bird to another place? Nay, rather he refused to depart from his inheritance; he held fast to the principles of righteousness in faith. He trusted in Yahweh, and though storms raged against him in the form of those who sought his destruction; he was not moved. Yahweh delivered him from the hand of all his enemies:

"The God of my Rock; in him will I trust ... I will call on Yahweh, who is worthy to be praised: so shall I be saved from my enemies. ... when the waves of death compassed me, the floods of ungodly men made me afraid; the sorrows of hell compassed me about; the snares of death prevented me; in my distress I called upon Yahweh, and cried to my God: and he did hear my voice out of his temple, and my cry did enter into his ears ... Yahweh liveth; and blessed by my rock; and exalted shall be the God of the Rock of my salvation" (2Sam 22:2-7, 47).

We see therefore, that the call to discipleship is indeed a call to activity, to labour in building up the Ecclesia, which is the House of God. But to build upon any other foundation than that which is laid can only bring disaster. Seeking to alter the foundations upon which the house is already erected can only cause instability and upheaval, with those who seek to do so being destined to fail. Unless Yahweh builds the house, the builders shall labour in vain. Unless the hearers of Messiah's words build upon the basis of those words, and in obedience to those words, the edifice that they labour to build will not stand. The Master knows our works; whether they are of the faithful kind, in harmony with the precepts he has given, or whether they be for the erection of a new edifice to the glory of men. And at the coming day of judgement, he will determine how they will stand.

Of course, in the ultimate sense, the Foundation upon which we build is Messiah himself, and the things testified concerning him: "for other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). These other things we have considered in connection with foundations are all bound up with the sacrifice of Christ. Though we must lay a foundation of repentance of good works and faith (Heb. 6:1), that which brings about our repentance and gives us faith, is Messiah, the Holy One of God. It is upon such a foundation in Him that eternal things shall stand. Indeed, it is said of Abraham's faith: "he looked for *a city which hath foundations*, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10). Living a life of dwelling in a tent as a stranger and sojourner in the land of promise, Abraham looked towards the time when this spiritual city shall be built, and rejoiced to see that day.

The Heavenly Jerusalem referred to here, is said to "have foundations". Ephesians chapter 2, and verse 20 describes those foundation, in speaking of the Household of God:

“Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens of the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon *the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the Chief Corner Stone*; in whom all the building fitly framed together growth unto an holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:19-21).

Again, the book of Revelation speaks of this:

“the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (Rev. 21:14).

The testimony of the Apostles therefore are all part of this foundation. The number 12 emphasises the Israelitish aspect of our Hope, as well as being the number of Messiah’s apostles.

In the days of Ezra, we find that the adversaries of Israel wrote a letter to the king in opposition to the building of the House of God. In this letter, there are basically two charges made against the building:

“Be it known unto the king, that the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, building *the rebellious and the bad city* ... be it known now unto the king, that, if this city be builded, and the walls set up again, then will *they not pay toll, tribute, and custom*, and so thou shalt endamage the revenue of the kings ... this city is a rebellious city, and hurtful unto kings and provinces, and that *they have moved sedition* within the same of old time ...” (Ezra 4:12-15).

Notice the two points here: firstly the city was rebellious and “moved sedition”, and secondly, they would refuse to pay the taxes: “toll, tribute and custom”. Interestingly, these two accusations were also made against Messiah:

“they began to accuse him, saying, We found this fellow perverting the nation, and *forbidding to give tribute to Caesar*, saying that he himself is Christ a king ... *he stirreth up the people*, teaching throughout all Jewry, beginning from Gallilee to this place” (Lu. 23: 1-5).

Human nature never changes, and so just as the adversaries raised accusation against the foundation builders of God’s House, even so Messiah’s adversaries raised similar accusations against him. Seeking to put him to death, they wrested his teaching to present him as being some sort of political activist, standing in opposition to the Roman leaders. Of course, Messiah did not forbid to pay taxes, but he did present himself as being the king of the Jews, foretold from ancient times by the prophets of old. A mixture of truth and error was directed against him, to secure his death.

Though they put Messiah to death, nevertheless all things were being directed by “the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). It was in the purpose of Yahweh that Christ should not only be put to death, but also raised to everlasting life. In so doing, he laid a foundation that cannot be moved by either the adversaries, or by adverse circumstances. It is written concerning him that:

“... if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man’s work shall be made manifest, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is” (1 Cor. 3:12-13).

This is the work that we must set our hand to: building upon the foundation laid by Messiah and his holy apostles, that at the last, we might be found to be faithful labourers looking beyond the difficulties of this life to the “city which hath foundations” – even the New Jerusalem of the Age to Come.

Christopher Maddocks