

THIS GREAT NATION

In the Year of Our Lord Eighteen-hundred Thirty-Four, the Congregationalist Union of England and Wales sent two of their ministers, Andrew Reed and James Matheson, to the United States of America for the following mission: “to make a fraternal visit to the churches of that land, to assure them of our Christian esteem and affection; and to bear home again the responses of kindness and confidence.” The two ministers, in their chapter on Prospects, gave this assessment:

Yes, they will accomplish all things, with the single provision, that they remain under the influence of religion. Religion is requisite to the welfare of any people; but they have made it emphatically necessary, not only to their prosperity, but to their political existence. The evils to which their promising circumstances chiefly expose them, are worldliness and presumption; and these can be quelled only by religion. No approaches to the experiment they are now making on the liberty of the subject, have been made with success; and they can only succeed by making religion their best ally. Universal suffrage, whatever may be its abstract merits or demerits, is neither desirable nor possible, except the people are the subjects of universal education and universal piety. America will be great if America will be good. If not, her greatness will vanish away like a morning cloud.

The two ministers applied a simple scriptural principle: a nation cannot be great if it is not good.

Because the first generation of Israelites after the Exodus were so rebellious, the Lord forbade them enter the promised land, and they died in the wilderness. When the second generation were ready to enter, Moses exhorted them concerning their covenant duties. He began with these words:

Now therefore hearken, O Israel, unto the statutes and unto the judgments, which I teach you, for to do them, that ye may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers giveth you. Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you. (Deuteronomy 4:1, 2)

Moses would a second time give to the people God’s law, and he told them that, if they would obey God’s law, then they would live, and prosper, in the promised land. God gave them His law based on His unchanging nature. His law is perfect just as he is perfect, and is not deficient in any way. So, Moses told the people not to add anything to the law, or take away anything from it. Moses further said to them:

Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the LORD my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the land whither ye go to possess it. Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the LORD our God is in all things that we call upon him for? And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?

Moses gave the law to the people, but he is not the source of it; he received it from the Lord. The law of Moses is the law of God; it is God's wisdom. The law of God is for personal piety: it tells every man how to serve God and man. Because a nation comprises men, if the men are great, then the nation will be great. The Lord was sending Israel into the promised land to conquer it, and to displace the heathen nations. If Israel would obey God's law, then they would prosper. Other nations would see their greatness. They would see the wisdom of the law of God, and they would adopt it as their own. Israel had the means to be the greatest nation on earth. Every nation could be great, if it would follow God's laws.

Then Moses said, "Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but teach them thy sons, and thy sons' sons." (Deuteronomy 4:5–9) The people, when they were settled in the promised land, and were prospering, would be tempted to think that their prosperity was simply their own doing, a product of their own labors, without God's help. They would forget about all the times God had provided for their needs, all the times he saved them in difficulty. They would become lax in respect of God's law, and fail to keep it. Moreover, they would fail to teach their children about God's unfailing faithfulness, and about everyone's duty to be faithful to God. If the generation entering into the promised land would keep God's law, then they would be a great nation. If, however, they would continue to be great, then they had to teach the next generation to keep God's law. A nation may be great, but, if it would remain great, then it must pass on to the next generation, not only the law of God, but a love for it. If a nation would be great, then it must love God's law; if it would continue to be great, then love of God's law must be its legacy.

Jesus said:

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:17–19)

The Son of God did not come to abolish the law of Moses; He came to fulfill it. He is the fulfillment of its types and shadows, and, when He came, then those parts of the law became defunct. The Son of God, after His ascension into heaven, sent the Roman army to destroy Jerusalem, signaling end to the Jewish dispensation, and so to the Jewish law. The moral law, however, based as it is on God's unchanging nature, never ends; it is always valid. Saint John wrote, "And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever." (1 John 2:17; compare 1 Corinthians 7:31) If anyone disobeys the moral law of God, and teaches others to do the same, then that one God will count that one to be least in His kingdom. If anyone obeys the law of God, and teaches others to do the same, especially his own children, to do the same, then God shall consider that one to be greatest in His kingdom. Nations are disciplined, not only when one generation observes God's law, but when each generation observes it, and teaches the next generation to do likewise.

Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honor, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen.