

## PATHS OF DESTINY

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Undated

Text: Proverbs 1:7a. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

We have been thinking together the last two weeks of the significance and implications of the great thought found over and over again in the Old Testament which says “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” It is a thought that bears serious thinking today not only because it was emphasized so frequently in the Old Testament writings, but because today we feel everywhere an unhealthy and uneasy spirit in our society which is aggravated by war conditions, a spirit which needs a corrective, and it is in this thought that I feel we can find that corrective.

Two weeks ago we were thinking on our modern outlook on life, how it fails to lead us to the good life because it has forgotten this fundamental truth that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. As a result, our modern emphasis upon freedom has led us astray by neglecting the basic laws of God which are needed to make real progress and not just change. We have forgotten to keep pace with our scientific progress with a corresponding improvement in our spiritual and moral life with the result that we find these new improvements inadequate toward showing us the better life. Last week we tried to show what kind of a God this text implies which tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Such a God is a God who demands something of us, a God who has ordained laws governing not only inanimate nature but all the activities of man, natural and moral laws which cannot be violated with impunity. With all our new knowledge we do not yet know enough to enable us to emancipate ourselves from the laws of God which rule over our lives. Just as we learn to use and control nature by learning the laws which rule her and acting in accordance with them, so we can never learn the good and the happy life unless we learn the moral laws of God and live according to them. The task of learning these laws is not so great as learning the laws of nature, for these have been revealed to us by God through the great religious minds of the ages as recorded in the Bible, and especially through the teachings of the Son of God, our Lord. Then, too, these laws are directly revealed to us in our own hearts, for we would all agree that these laws are right; the trouble is that we don't feel that it is necessary for us to make the effort to follow them.

I should like to conclude my remarks on this theme today with an attempt to prove these statements by pointing to examples in history of what happens when a people or a nation forgets this fundamental principle that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. History is always a useful guide to man so long as he does not make the mistake of using some point in past history the goal of his present progress. History is useful as a guide in looking back, in order that man can better order his future. In the same way landmarks which are behind you are useful in guiding a boat on a lake; you do not aim at these landmarks behind you, but with these as a guide you go forward in another direction trusting in that which is behind you to guide you to your goal in front.

We do not have to look to ancient history for examples; the present scene gives sufficient illustration; we can examine the antecedents and beginnings of the present world conflict to find

examples enough. It is a perplexing thing to most people how this war could come to a world which is so civilized; how, for example, the picturesque Japanese people, and how Germany, the land of the poet and the thinker, could fall in with a primitive and destructive philosophy of life which repudiates the values civilization has been struggling to produce. How this happened may be perplexing, but it is certain that there are reasons if we can but find them. A thing like this does not just happen; and it is too easy to explain the trouble by condemning a people wholesale as savage. It is my conviction that there are very real causes which we can find, and they all center around this fundamental fact that people have forgotten that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. I do not feel so qualified to speak about Japan as I do concerning Germany, but these important facts should be noted. First of all Japan became civilized as we call it, that is, she began to copy our western culture only after the middle of the last century, since 1850 when Perry sailed into the main harbor of Japan and forced her to open her ports to western traders. In this incredibly short time Japan copied everything western, but the time was too short for her to copy and learn our western spiritual heritage, the Christian philosophy which has guided our civilization. It is true that before this time there had been Catholic missionaries in Japan spreading the Christian religion, for about a hundred years between 1550 and 1640. But the Catholics were expelled from Japan when the leaders realized that Spain from her vantage point in the Philippines was eyeing Japan as a possible conquest, planning to add her to their empire, and using her missionaries to this end. Thus Christianity was banned in Japan until about 1860; the royal edict banning it was posted on all crossroads until 1875. Thus the great epic of the westernization of Japan was accomplished in a few generations. And note particularly that it was accomplished toward the close of the last century when religion was having its worst struggles with science. This was the age of rampant materialism with its pagan philosophies. And as Japan copied everything western, especially our science and education, which she found so attractive, she copied our new materialistic philosophies and took them more seriously than we with our Christian heritage ever could. When we add to this the revival (inevitable) of Japanese nationalism, as she became stronger and self-conscious, we begin to see how she could become such a dangerous enemy to civilization. We must realize that the Japanese are not stupid savages; they have a higher rate of literacy than the United States—99% can read and write. The trouble is on the other side; they have learned all too faithfully what we have taught them in our modern science corrupted with pagan philosophies. The trouble is that we did not teach them the Christian tradition which must go with this development in science to keep it in control. It is interesting that as Japan copied everything western, she planned to copy our religion too. For a long while she toyed with the idea of making Christianity the state religion, because she thought it was our religion and our God which made us so strong and prosperous. But she soon learned that science and military might can be developed without our religion; and that our religion seemed to have very little to do with them. Thus the corroding acids of modern materialism rotted the fabric of Christian ideology which the missionaries tried to weave. We have only to read the writings of the great Japanese Christian Kagawa to see how Christianity in Japan has been fighting for years against materialism. The present events seem to indicate that the battle was lost, but the few loyal Christians among them will be ready to continue the battle after the war, and with our help make a Christian society. When we see how a pagan materialism was so enthusiastically learned by the Japanese people, it is not too surprising that events have turned out as they have. If only they had copied our religion too, as they once planned! But because we

were reluctant to send missionaries in large numbers during this time we have to send our soldiers in larger numbers today with a different kind of mission. (Text)

The antecedents of the modern paganism in Germany is even more difficult to find, for Germany throughout modern times has been a leader in the arts and sciences and learning in general. She has produced some of the greatest religious thinkers, too; we must eternally be grateful to her for Martin Luther alone. But how could she turn so savage all at once we ask? Even Germans themselves who have fled their native country are puzzled. Thomas Mann, the world famous novelist, who has just finished his great but dull work on Joseph of Egypt, insists that the Germany of today has broken completely with the Germany of yesterday. And so we wonder how all these terrible things - this senseless race prejudice, the brutal persecution of the Jews, the unheard of attack on organized Christianity, the mad oppression of freedom, the exaggerated pride of the flesh, and the insane imperialistic militarism, - can happen in the land of the poet and the thinker. We are puzzled and can find no connection; thus we say that it is all due to Hitler, or to the Prussian military caste. But this change did not happen all at once; there is a deep continuity of thought between the Germany of yesterday and today. The very people whom we denounce today, calling them, somewhat pharisaically, barbaric and pagan, have drunk deeply of the wells of German poetry and philosophy. The disease of Nazism is caused by germs which long ago began to infect the leaders of German learning. And the basic root of this whole condition of spiritual bankruptcy lies again in this: men have forgotten that the "fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge".

The leaders of German thought have erred for years in forgetting that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. They fell into error by their complete admiration of and devotion to the Greek civilization. It was the Greek worship of beauty and intellect that attracted the great German thinkers. Greek philosophy and Greek art became the pattern for all their thought. And in doing this, in worshipping the pagan Greek civilization, the German intellectuals rejected consciously or unconsciously the Judaistic tradition in Christianity with its emphasis upon the moral law. Although Greece was the leader in civilized thought, although no civilization has contributed more to thought and art, the Greek world was essentially pagan, and, being pagan, had no concern for morals. It was the deep-seated immorality in Greece that finally brought about her decline as a world power, just as Rome was to decline later for the same reasons. But the German intellectual leaders did not consider this fact, because they were so attracted by the Greek intellectualism, and, following this intellectualism, they began to discard the Jewish morality which is so important a part of Christianity.

This idea, that the Greek ideal is responsible ultimately for the rise of Nazism, is not found in the many books on the subject. And yet I am convinced that this is the ultimate reason; and this is not a hunch - I can support this argument thoroughly by reference to German thinkers and literary men. This is not the place to do it here, but I should like to point to a few factors which have been overlooked in the development of German thought which show how it gradually forgot that all true knowledge must be based on the fear of the Lord. First of all, the Greek emphasis upon the intellect led to an aristocratic view of life on the part of German poets and thinkers, whereby they exalted the man of genius. In worshipping the intellect, they developed the idea that the intellectual aristocrat was beyond good and evil, just as the Greek intellectual

had no concern for moral requirements, and considered the unenlightened slave not worthy of consideration. A spirit of exalted self-confidence developed which easily fed a growing spirit of nationalism. The German thinker began to paint the character of man in glowing idealistic colors showing his great potentialities. Nietzsche carries this tendency to the extreme but all the leaders tended to think of man as God. The Greek idea of fate developed in their thinking to give them an exalted view of their own destiny. [self-dependence - individualism]

But this influence from the pagan Greek world shows itself in a more sinister fashion in the conscious or unconscious rejection of Biblical Christianity particularly in its Jewish aspects. It is not without reason that Nazis have quoted their revered poets and thinkers of Germany of the past to justify their anti-Semitic and anti-Christian feelings, for these great thinkers of the past had strong anti-Jewish and anti-Christian prejudices. They showed this prejudice in the way they set aside the Old Testament and the Jewish antecedents of the Christian revelation, and in their open rejection of the Christian standards of morality. And this attitude again is a result of the worship of the Greek ideal. It is interesting to recall that the ancient Greek world was not at all interested in Christianity. We are told that when Paul preached in Athens, he was a complete failure; the intellectual Greeks thought the Christian teaching ridiculous. What bothered the Greeks is the Christian idea that man is sinful. This same thing the German intellectuals rejected vehemently. Hegel, the greatest German philosopher, said in regard to original sin, "that it is produced in the bosom of a perverted humanity which must despise itself from a moral point of view." Hegel shows his aristocratic feelings and his worship of the intellect and his superb self-esteem by fitting the Christian revelation into his philosophy in a subordinate position. Hegel rejected the Old Testament which Jesus knew and loved, calling it a description not of God but of a demon of hatred. He is not willing to insist that Jesus was not a Jew, but he contends that Jesus broke with the Jewish spirit, for, he says, "the infinite spirit has no room in the dungeon of a Jewish soul". I am picking on Hegel because he is one of the most admired and respected of German thinkers throughout the world, who at first thought would seem to be far from Nazi thought. And yet if we substitute the word Nordic for the word Greek in which Hegel found all that was good, and assert the superiority of this over everything Jewish or Christian we have modern Nazism. The rejection of Christian standards of morality followed this worship of the Greek mind, as German thinkers felt that the negative aspect of Christian morality deprived man of his enjoyment of the things of this world. The Christian morality exalting the weak and the humble, stressing morality instead of intellect, was not in keeping with the Greek way of thinking which the German intellectuals followed, and so they tended to reject it. Nietzsche long before Hitler rejected Christian morality as a slave morality invented by the Jews to protect themselves from their Roman lords.

It is not strange that with this spirit in Germany its Protestant theology would become similarly perverted. The writings of the great theologians in Germany of the past century are remarkable in the way they tend to reject all Jewish influence upon the Christian gospel and question more and more the truth of the Christian morality. It is no wonder that religious thinking in Germany was inadequate to stem the tide of a growing Nazism, for all too often the churches were corrupt, too. This is always the inevitable danger of a state church and state dominated education. Thus today professors in theological schools can begin their lectures with a Heil Hitler, and the state churches all too often preach what they are told.

In this way a nation of intellectual and literary leaders became corrupt, because they became so impressed with the virtues of the Greek civilization that they became blind to its dangers, and rejected the Jewish morality which is the needed check against corruption of worshipping false gods. This corrupting influence working quietly and unseen paved the way for the modern philosophies of force which reject the Christian morality.

I have followed this theme stressing the importance of morality as the foundation for knowledge by these references to actual history in an attempt to show how important this moral foundation for society is. If men are to live together in a peaceful, civilized manner, they must remember that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. The modern influence of pagan ways of thinking has spread widely; it is not found only in Germany and Japan, but it is flourishing right here among us. We must be awake to its danger and realize that religion has to be taken seriously as the solid rock foundation which will guide men to the good life.