

SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

BY

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SERMON I.

THE WORSHIPPERS IN THE HEAVENLY TEMPLE.

REVELATION vii. 14, 15.

These are they, which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple.

THE figure, under which heaven is represented to our view in this vision, is that of a temple, crowded with worshippers, and resounding with praises. The man, who loves the tabernacles of the Lord as the saints of old loved them, will view this representation of his future residence with peculiar interest. There are indeed seasons in the life of the established Christian, in which the prospect of this heavenly temple brings to his heart a peace and a blessedness, which pass all understanding. While his soul in the secrecy of retirement is rising on the wings of faith to the footstool of its God, the veil, which conceals eternity from his sight, seems to be drawn aside, and heaven, with all its glories, opens to his view. He beholds the splendour of the heavenly house, he hears the songs of its redeemed inhabitants, and deems himself already a partaker in their joy.

Would we, my brethren, enter into the Christian's secret, and share his honours and his happiness? Our affections must first be fixed where his are fixed, on things above. We must have a treasure in eternity, and our conversation must be in heaven. Let us then, this very hour, strive to elevate our minds to the dwelling-place of God. While seated in this earthly house of prayer, let us lift up our thoughts to that glorious temple above us, in which all the triumphant church are at this very moment assembled and pouring forth their praises. There dwells the Saviour, who is all our salvation and all our desire; there live the Christian friends, who were once dear to our souls on earth; and there, if we are the redeemed of the Lord, when the days of our tribulation are ended, will be our own eternal home. O may we all one day enter that house of rest! May we all love to fix our thoughts on it now, and contemplate its blessedness! May we often experience, within these walls, a foretaste of its joys!

The representation, which the beloved disciple has here given us of the happiness of the heavenly world, suggests these four subjects for our consideration:—a temple, the worshippers in this temple, the nature of their worship, and

the privileges they enjoy. We shall however find sufficient matter for our present meditation, if we confine our attention to the two former of these subjects.

I. Let us consider, first, the temple here spoken of. It is a heavenly temple, a holy place, not standing on this perishable world, but having its foundations laid on the everlasting hills of heaven. All other temples have been erected by man, but this temple has been built by Jehovah himself, to be the eternal dwelling-place of his beloved church, and the seat of his own glorious throne. He dwelt indeed figuratively in the temple at Jerusalem, and had the chambers of his priests surrounding him on every side; but he dwells visibly in this heavenly house, and is gradually collecting within its walls all the countless myriads of his saints, and will make them forever ministering and rejoicing priests around his throne.

Where this temple is, we know not. We are indeed taught to consider heaven as a state, rather than as a place; but we have reason to conclude, from several passages of Scripture, that there is some portion of the universe set apart to be the palace of its great King; that there is within the boundaries of the creation some glorious world, where Jesus in his human form now lives and reigns, and where he will eventually assemble, with the innumerable company of angels, all the sinners of mankind, whom his blood has purchased.

All that we know of this world is, that it really exists, and that it is a world of purity and peace. Our Bibles indeed tell us something of its glories, and more than our limited capacities can fully comprehend; but still the most glowing descriptions that language can convey, and the most exalted conceptions to which our imaginations can reach, fall infinitely short of that dazzling splendour which fills the courts of the living God. The world which we inhabit, though defiled by sin and under the curse of God, has yet so much order, beauty, and magnificence in it, that we are often delighted and astonished as we contemplate its scenes. What then must be the glory of that world, which has never felt the polluting touch of sin, which was prepared before the foundations of the earth were laid for the thrones of the redeemed, and adorned with a full display of the Almighty's unclouded brightness? Happy are they, who dwell in such a temple! Blessed is the man, who is but a door-keeper in such a house!

II. The happy beings, who are the worshippers in this splendid temple, are described in the passage connected with the text, and our second subject of consideration leads us to turn our attention to them.

Who then are these rejoicing worshippers, and whence came they? Many of them are natives of this heavenly world, and have been for countless ages ministering servants in this house. These are described, in the eleventh verse of this chapter, as standing round about the throne, and falling before the throne on their faces, and worshipping God. But these are not the worshippers referred to in the text. There is another and a more numerous class of priests serving in this temple, singing another and a louder song, and occupying as honourable a place.

“These are they, which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

1. This description reminds us, first, of *the former condition of these worshippers*. It tells us that it was an *earthly* condition. They were not, like the angels, born in this house. They were natives of an apostate world, and had an earthly origin. The powers of their nature were once far less exalted than those of their fellow-worshippers, and they were altogether incapable of sharing in many of their services. Their spirits were united to a frail body, a body of humiliation, taken from the dust of the earth, and rapidly tending to dust again.

Their condition too was a *sinful* one. Their great tribulation was brought upon them by the greatness of their sins. Not that they were more sinful than the other inhabitants of the earth which they dwelt on, but they were once as much encompassed with infirmities as any of their brethren, as dead in trespasses and sins. There is not one among them, who was not a transgressor while on earth, and who has not to this very hour a remembrance of his guilt. It is this remembrance, which makes their gratitude so fervent, and their song so loud. It is this, which draws from them so exalted a hymn of praise, that the angels cannot reach its strains, and are forced to wonder at its sweetness.

They were also in an *afflicted* condition. Not a single sorrow nor care now enters their hearts, yet they were once in “great tribulation.” Many of them came out of a state of peculiar distress and sufferings. They had trials of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea moreover of bonds and imprisonment. They were stoned, were sawn asunder, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheep skins and goat skins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented. All of them were in some degree men of sorrows. They were as well acquainted with poverty and want, anxiety and care, as we are now. Their bodies were as weak and liable to pain and sickness, as our own. Their houses of mourning were as frequent, and gloomy, and their graves as dreary and cold.

It was the same with their spiritual troubles. They felt, at seasons, the same painful and suspicious fears, that we feel; they were assaulted by the same temptations, stricken by the same arrows, and forced to struggle with the same enemies. Not a single temporal or spiritual sorrow can ever enter into our hearts, which has not been a thousand times felt, in all its bitterness, by these rejoicing inhabitants of the heavenly world.

2. Such was the original condition of these worshippers; it was an earthly, a sinful, and a suffering one. Let us look, secondly, at *their present condition*. Here however our knowledge again fails us. We know what it is to be sinful and afflicted creatures upon earth, but we do not know what it is to be holy and rejoicing beings before the throne of God in heaven. In this far distant world, we can neither see all the glories of the temple above us, nor enter into the full meaning of its services. Some particulars however of the present condition of the redeemed saints, are given us by the beloved disciple in this vision.

It is represented to us as a state of *peace*, a state of freedom from sorrow and from pain. They are *come out* of their tribulation; they have passed through it, and left it all behind. Their wearisome pilgrimage is brought to an everlasting end. They have exchanged an earth of labour and misery, for a heaven of peace and rest. The billows of adversity, which once filled their souls with fear, still roll on and rage, but they are all rolling far beneath them, and can never again toss them with their waves. We deem it a mercy to be kept for a day, yea, for an hour, free from anxiety and sorrow; but some of these worshippers have not shed a single tear, nor been harassed by a single care, for ages.

Their state is also a state of *purity*. “They have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Without this washing they could never have been admitted into the heavenly temple, for nothing that defiles has ever entered there. Even in that earthly house, which was built for the Lord at Jerusalem, his priests were constrained to wash in the sacred laver before they approached the mercy-seat, which was the symbol of his presence; and surely he will not admit one, who is defiled and unclean, to minister before him in his temple above. He, that was so careful of the purity of his earthly house, will not suffer his heavenly mansion to be polluted.

The robes of these priests were once indeed defiled and stained by sin. Their garments were as mean and polluted as ours are now, and neither men nor angels could have cleansed them. Ten thousand tears of penitence could not have washed them white, nor the blood of martyrdom concealed their stains. How then was their filthiness removed? By the water of baptism? All these priests were indeed washed in this water, but it was not this, which purified their souls. Daily experience proves that no outward means can remove the crimson stain of sin or do away its filthiness. While we are contending that baptism has this power, thousands around us, who have been baptized in the name of Christ, are giving a death-blow to all our reasonings by their worldly and ungodly lives. This, as well as every other ordinance, is indeed sometimes made the means of communicating blessings to the soul; but there is no inseparable connexion between the outward visible sign and the inward spiritual grace of any sacrament. A man may go to the table of the Lord, and yet not discern the Lord’s body there. He may be washed in the water of baptism, and yet be as much in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity, as Simon Magus or Judas Iscariot.

Could we but once be brought, brethren, to see something of the real nature and extent of the depravity, which reigns within us, we should that very moment be convinced, that no outward ordinances, no human exertions, can cleanse the soul from its pollution; that the evil is too powerful and too deeply seated to yield to such remedies as these. We should see that the matter will not admit, for a moment, of doubt or argument. Our feelings would at once refute the most subtle reasonings.

There is indeed a fountain, which has power to wash away sin and uncleanness; but this is a spiritual fountain, possessing a spiritual and mighty efficacy. These heavenly priests have discovered this sacred laver, and in their songs they point it out to us. We find them always ascribing the change which has passed on them to one cause, and giving to one Being all the glory. “Unto him, that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever.” “They have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb;” that blood, which, the Bible tells us, cleanseth from all sin, and which can make the sinner’s defiled robes as white as snow. “*Therefore*” says the text, “are they before the throne of God.” This was the reason, why the everlasting doors of the heavenly temple were opened to them, while thousands of their fellow-sinners are for ever excluded from its courts—they were washed, they were sanctified, they were justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.”

When once they had applied to this cleansing fountain, they were brought into a state of pardon and acceptance with God. “He blotted out as a thick cloud their transgressions, and as a cloud their sins.” The guilt of their sins, strictly speaking, still remains on them. They still deserve, and ever must deserve, the wrath of God; but all their liability to punishment is completely and for ever done away, so entirely removed from them, that their reconciled God deals with them in heaven, as though he remembered their sins and iniquities no more. In this sense, “He does not see iniquity in Jacob, nor perverseness in Israel.” God looks upon his saints as criminals, but he views them in Christ as acquitted criminals, as beloved children; as having obtained, by an act of grace, a complete and perfect pardon, and received from him a title to richer privileges, than their sin had forfeited. They were indeed, continually contracting fresh defilement as long as they remained on earth, and were constrained to wash again and again in the same fountain, that cleansed their robes at first; but if this fountain had left the unpardoned guilt of only one sin upon their souls, that one sin would have disqualified them for the pure services of the habitation of God, and have barred for ever its sacred doors against their entrance.

This free and full pardon of their sins is not however the only blessing, which the heavenly worshippers have obtained through the blood of the Lamb. Had this been all, they could never have joined in the worship of the heavenly world, nor sung the songs of Zion. The same fountain, that freed them from the guilt of sin, washed away sin itself, freed them from its reigning power, and put a new and holy principle within their hearts. Not that they were at once brought into a state of perfect purity. As the consecration of some of the Jewish priests was carried on for many days before it was completed, so the purification of these priests was a long and arduous work. Years passed away before some of them were completely sanctified, and made meet to minister among the saints

in light; and they were all plagued to their dying hour, in a greater or less degree, with the struggling corruptions of their evil hearts. But sin could not follow them beyond the grave. As soon as their liberated souls escaped from this world of pollution, they entered a world, where this enemy can never come; and all is now unsullied purity and perfect holiness. Their graces, which were so often obscured and sullied here on earth, now shine forth with unclouded brightness and never-fading lustre. "Christ," says the Scripture, "loved the church, and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish."

We may observe, further, that the state of these worshippers in the temple of God is a state of *triumph*. The white robes, in which they are clad, are not their only ornaments. We are told in the ninth verse of this chapter, that they have palms in their hands.

The palm tree, among many of the ancient nations, was an emblem of victory. Hence its branches were used to adorn triumphal processions. The general, whose victories the triumph was designed to celebrate, carried a small branch of it in his hand, and was thus recognized as a conqueror. When therefore the redeemed are described as having palms in their hands, we are reminded that they were once soldiers, who were not ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified, but fought manfully under his banner, and by the strength of his arm completely conquered every enemy. The saints on earth indeed are warring the same warfare, in which these glorified beings were engaged, and are continually obtaining victories in it; but then they must wait till all the days of their warfare are accomplished, before they can have the triumphal chariot and the palm. The soldier never triumphs till the war is ended, and the enemy completely subdued. The saints in heaven have finished the painful conflict, and are now gone up for their reward to Jehovah's temple. And O what blessed triumphs are theirs! What glorious spoils! What everlasting shouts of victory and songs of joy! Their triumph is a never ending triumph. Their palms will never wither. Their robes of honour will never fade. The lustre of their crown never can be tarnished. The light of day will be extinguished, and the stars of heaven be darkened, but the brightness of their glory will be as incorruptible as the throne of God.

3. As we look on these worshippers in heaven, we may observe, thirdly, *the greatness of their number*. They are said, in the ninth verse, to be "a multitude, a great multitude, a multitude which no man can number."

But here it may be asked, Whence can this great multitude come? We read our Bibles, and we find the people of God spoken of there as a little flock. We look around us in the world, and are sometimes tempted to ask, Where shall a godly man be found? How then shall this great multitude be brought to glory? From what unknown globe has sovereign mercy fetched them? We dare not say,

in answer to these enquiries, that all, who are now rejoicing in the heavenly courts, were once inhabitants of the earth, on which we live. The benefits of redeeming grace may be as extensive as the boundaries of the creation. There is however every reason to suppose, that the great multitude of saints, who are spoken of in this vision, were originally strangers and pilgrims in this world of sorrow. It is true indeed that the way, which leads from this sinful world to the heavenly mansions, is represented in the Scriptures as extremely narrow. We see too that there are few walking in it. But it does not therefore follow, that the greater part of the human race descend by another road to another kingdom. Millions of the children of men are, we trust, carried yearly in their infancy to the realms of light and many an aged saint also is seen patiently walking in the path, which leads to God, and will soon be standing in his temple, a rejoicing priest. Satan does not number among his subjects all the inhabitants of our globe. The Redeemer has a people on the earth. He is seeing of the travail of his soul in many places, and in a thousand hearts, though we see it not. Who can tell how many a humble Christian has been travelling to the land of rest, while almost all around him, and even the honoured instrument, that first turned his soul to God, have been ignorant of his faith? The man has poured forth alone his prayers and tears. Men have not seen the uplifted eye, nor heard the secret prayer for mercy; but the angels of heaven have rejoiced over the weeping suppliant, and at length carried him in triumph to the temple of his God. We know too, that before the destruction of this world of sin, it will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. A time is rapidly approaching, when the standard of the cross shall be erected in every land, and Jesus of Nazareth reign in every place. We need not fear being solitary inhabitants of the heavenly house. God has not built so splendid a temple to be the only blank in his crowded creation, We and all around us may make light of that voice, which invites us to enter in, but still the marriage supper of the Lamb will be abundantly furnished with guests.

A review of the cheering subject, which we have thus briefly considered, leads us to observe, in conclusion, that *the gospel of Christ does not promise to its followers any exemption from the calamities of life*. It tells us that man is born to trouble, and that the servants of God shall have their full portion of the sorrows of mortality. The Bible does not attempt to cheat us into a profession of religion by false representations. It promises us happiness in heaven, and many joys in the road, which leads to it; but, at the same time, it plainly tells us that this road is a path of trial. All the saints are indeed described as rejoicing, but then they are said to be “rejoicing in tribulation.” Their nearness to God has neither removed calamity from them, nor blunted their feelings when smarting under it. Who then are we, brethren, that some special exemption should be made in our favour? David, and Paul, and every other saint, have drunk of the cup of sorrow; why then should we expect it to be always kept from our lips?

Have we deserved it less than they, or do we need it less? Have we fewer sins to be subdued; less pride, less self-dependence, less earthly-mindedness to be rooted out? Tribulation is the portion of all the redeemed, and, if we have ever tasted of redemption, it will, in some shape or other, be our portion. Our Saviour tells us so. This is one of the first sayings he addresses to them, who follow him, and one of the first truths he generally makes them feel the meaning of, "In the world ye shall have tribulation." Let us then prepare to meet our promised trials, and not only to meet them, but to welcome them with cheerfulness and joy. They are designed to help us forward in our course, to lead us on in the road, which will take us to the temple and the throne of God. "Our light affliction," says one, who had tasted of much severer sorrows than ever fell to the lot of any of us, and was quite as capable of forming a true estimate of their nature, "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

There is another reflection suggested to us by the words we have been considering. *How great is the contrast between the present and the future condition of the followers of Jesus!* Those, whom the apostle saw in this glorious temple, are all said to have come out of great tribulation. They were perhaps some of the first and most persecuted members of the church. But what a blessed and wondrous change has passed upon them! They were once perhaps wandering about in sheep skins and goat skins; they are now clothed in white raiment, walking the streets of the new Jerusalem, and treading the courts of its splendid temple. They were once glad to fly for shelter to mountains, caves, and dens of the earth; they are now occupying everlasting mansions in Jehovah's house. Those heads, which are now encircled with crowns of glory, were once bowed down under a sense of guilt. Those tongues, which are now shouting "Worthy is the Lamb," were once complaining of their wretchedness and sin. Those hearts, which are now glowing with the most exalted happiness and rejoicing in spotless purity, were once full of corruption and perplexity, and aching with cares and sorrows.

Has such a change as this passed on these once sinful and afflicted saints? And is there no change awaiting those, who are now following the same Lord in the same path of tribulation? Shall they never exchange a world of suffering for a heaven of rest, a vale of tears for a mount of joy? O look, my Christian brethren, to that glorious army of martyrs, to that church of the first-born. See them on their thrones. Listen to their songs of triumph. Soon, very soon, shall you be numbered with them. Only tread in their steps; wash in that fountain, which cleansed them; keep close to that Saviour, in whom they believed; serve faithfully that God whom they loved and feared; and your robes shall soon be as white as theirs, your songs as joyful, your crowns as bright.

But the voice of consolation is not the only language that the Holy Spirit addresses to us in the text. Here is, lastly, *a loud call to self-examination*. This

great multitude, brethren, may stand before the throne of God, and yet we may not be included in their number. The gates of this heavenly temple may be opened to ten thousand times ten thousand ransomed sinners, and yet closed against us. There is another and a very different house, in which we may be forced to seek an everlasting home. There is the dwelling-place of Satan in eternity, as well as the temple of the living God. To which of these mansions then are we hastening? We must soon be lodged for ever in one or the other of them, which will be our habitation? Shall we be the ministering priests of Satan or of God?

If we would obtain a faithful answer to such questions as these, we must not be content with referring to our present troubles, and drawing an inference from them that all will in the end be well. Tribulation, it is true, is the portion of the people of God, but it is also the portion of another and a more numerous people, the children of the wicked one. The severest afflictions prove nothing as to our spiritual state and character. We may be amongst the most wretched on earth, and yet, notwithstanding all our sufferings, we may be also amongst the most wretched in the world to come. We may resemble the glorified inhabitants of heaven in their former state of tribulation, and yet never be made partakers of their present happiness. The question to be asked is not, whether I have been afflicted; but, whether my afflictions have been sanctified afflictions; whether, through grace, they have forced me to see my spiritual misery and wretchedness; whether they have made me feel the plague of my sinful heart, and led me to seek for help in a crucified Saviour; whether they have softened, changed, humbled me? The great question is, have I washed in that fountain, which God has opened for sin and for uncleanness, and have I been really cleansed there? Is the power of sin giving way, and the love of holiness gradually gaining strength in my heart? O brethren, how few among us can bear to bring our profession of Christianity to such a test as this! We have no heartfelt sense of our spiritual pollution; we feel not our need of Christ; we desire not the washing of his blood. As for inward purity, purity of heart, we seldom think of it, and can hardly understand what is meant by it. But what is that hope of heaven worth, which is not accompanied with this inward purity? Does not the Scripture say, "He, that hath this hope in him," a good hope of heaven, "purifieth himself, even as God is pure?" and do not your consciences testify, that there is no communion between purity and you?

Dare not then, in direct opposition to the word of God, to hope for heaven till sin is become hateful to your soul, and perfect holiness the first wish of your heart; till you have gone with a feeling, penitent, and believing heart, to the fountain, which infinite mercy has opened for transgressors on the cross, and washed your defiled robes and made them white in its sacred water. This fountain is still standing open for sinners. The Redeemer's work of salvation is not yet completed. Though he has already carried innumerable thousands to his

house, there yet is room, room for thousands more, room for you. Do you really desire to enter in? Have you but a willing and a humble heart? This is all a gracious Saviour asks. Take it to his cross. However polluted by iniquity, he will cleanse it there, and make you a pure and rejoicing worshipper for ever in the temple of your God.