

SERMONS,
PREACHED
IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF
HIGH WYCOMBE.

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SERMON X

THE DEATH OF MOSES.

DEUTERONOMY xxxiv. 5.

So Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord.

THE chapter of which these words are a part, contains a short but remarkable account of the death and burial of Moses. To lead the children of Israel to the land of Canaan, this faithful servant of God had abandoned the fairest prospects of honour in the court of Pharaoh, and endured for forty years unceasing trials and difficulties in the wilderness; and now at length, when the object of all his labours seems about to be attained, when he has arrived on the very brink of Jordan and within sight of the promised land, the hand of death removes him from the world, and leaves to us another striking instance of the mysterious nature of the ways of God.

The circumstances connected with his death are as interesting as they are remarkable, and “they are written here for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.” Let us then direct our attention to them, and endeavour to draw from them instruction in righteousness.

I. The first truth of which they remind us, is this—*The Sovereign of the world can carry on his purposes in it without the help of man.*

Who was this Moses, whose death is here recorded? He was a man of the most eminent talents and most exalted piety. He had been for forty years the leader of the hosts of Israel, and, during the whole of that long period, their honour and safety, their meat and their drink, their very existence, seemed to depend on him.

At what period was this Moses taken from this people? At the very period when he seemed most necessary to them. Under his guidance they had overcome the dangers of the wilderness, but they had now to encounter still greater dangers. They had to pass over Jordan, to fight with enemies stronger and more numerous than themselves, to drive them from their country, and to establish themselves in it. In this critical and dangerous situation, when every eye was turned to him for direction and assistance, and all their hopes of success were centred in him, their illustrious leader was taken from them, and all their prospects appeared at once blasted and destroyed.

How mysterious was this dispensation! And yet, brethren, the occurrences of every day are involved in almost equal mystery. A great and difficult work is to be accomplished in the church or in the world, and the Lord raises up and

prepares an instrument for performing it. He calls him out into actual service; he crowns his efforts with astonishing success; but in the midst of his work, at the very period when he seems most necessary for the completion of it, he removes him from the world, lays him silent and inactive in the grave, and finishes his work without him.

Do we ask why he acts thus? why he thus breaks in pieces the instrument before the work is done? He does it to teach us our nothingness and his greatness; to show the world, that although he is pleased to employ human instruments, he does not need them; to let his creatures see, that even if the hosts of heaven should cease to obey his word, he could form other hands to do his work, or accomplish his purposes without any instrument at all. He does it to bring the hearts of his people to a closer and more simple dependence on himself. He dashes to pieces the cistern, that they may go to the fountain. He breaks the reed, that they may be led to rest on the rock of ages.

While therefore the King of Zion sits on his holy hill, we have no reason to fear for the safety of the church, or for the honour of our God. Israel passed over Jordan and triumphed over all their enemies, without Moses. The church of Christ also shall stand, and shall be established in the earth, though she may seem to be without a helper or a friend. Her lights may disappear, her ministers may be removed, and her enemies may rejoice; but “God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God shall help her, and that right early.” As for her enemies, “he will clothe them with shame, but upon himself shall his crown flourish.”

II. We are taught, secondly, by the history before us, that *sin is exceedingly hateful in the sight of God, and that he will mark it with his displeasure even in his most beloved servants.*

Why was Moses commanded to go up unto the mountain of Nebo, and die? Although he was an hundred and twenty-three years old, he still retained all the vigour of youth, and seemed warranted to expect many years of life and usefulness. “His eye was not dim, nor was his natural force abated.” Why again was not this eminent saint allowed to pass over Jordan, and to enter with his brethren the land of Canaan? He had been a faithful servant of God. He had given up for him all the pleasures and honours of Pharaoh’s court. He had chosen and cheerfully endured affliction and reproach with his people, and esteemed them “greater riches than the treasures of Egypt.” He had made these sacrifices and suffered these trials, that he might obtain an inheritance in the promised land; and now, when arrived after years of anxiety and labour on its borders and earnestly desiring to enter it, he is not allowed so much as to set a foot on it, but is removed from the world. Why was this holy man thus treated by a righteous God? The scriptures inform us. He had sinned against that God. Though distinguished by a uniform course of meekness and faith, he had on one occasion

spoken unadvisedly with his lips, and manifested in his conduct anger and unbelief. The children of Israel had murmured at Kadesh for want of water, and to silence their murmurs, the Lord commanded Moses to speak unto one of the rocks around them, and promised that at his word it should bring forth water before their eyes. But the agitated prophet exceeded his commission. Moved with indignation, he called the murmuring people rebels; and instead of speaking to the rock, he smote it twice, as though he doubted the efficacy of a word, and thought his rod necessary to effect the miracle. "Hear now, ye rebels," he cried, "must we fetch you water out of this rock?" And he lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice."

This was the offence of Moses, the only offence recorded of him; and though this admitted of many excuses, and was repented of almost as soon as it was committed, the divine indignation was kindled against him and Aaron, and they were both condemned to die in the wilderness.

How forcibly then does this history remind us, that we have to do with a God of awful holiness and fearful righteousness; with one who will not bear with sin, though it be in the dearest and most distinguished of his saints! Moses and Aaron among his priests, and Samuel and David among them that call upon his name, even these favoured men must be visited with judgments, when they dare to turn aside from his holy ways. It is true that his loving-kindness he will not utterly take from his ransomed people, nor suffer his faithfulness to fail; yet if they break his statutes and keep not his commandments, he has pledged himself to "visit their transgressions with the rod and their iniquity with stripes." Where he forgives, he will not wholly spare. He may so pardon the sin, as not to inflict on the sinner eternal condemnation; and yet he may take a severe vengeance on his iniquities. He acts thus, that he may prevent any abuse of his grace, that he may manifest the holiness of his nature and his law, that he may excite watchfulness and circumspection in his people, that he may reprove and warn the ungodly sinner.

Let us learn therefore, whatever our characters may be, to abhor and dread that which is evil. Are you serving and fearing God? Remember that God has other punishments for sin besides the woes of eternity; and these punishments, if you dare to sin, will be poured out upon your head. Are you living without God in the world, strangers to holiness and grace? Remember that one transgression excluded the faithful Moses from Canaan; what then will be your doom, laden as you are with so many sins, and so hardened in guilt? God cannot endure sin even in the people who fear him, without testifying his sore displeasure against it; will he then bear with it in you? in you who despise his mercy, as well as mock at his laws? in you who brave his vengeance and defy his power? "If these things be done in the green tree," will nothing be done in the dry?

III. We may learn, further, from the circumstances attending the death of

Moses, that *the afflicted servant of God is generally enabled to submit with resignation to the chastisements of his heavenly Father.*

Moses anxiously wished to enter Canaan, and, as we are informed in the third chapter of this book, he at first besought the Lord to revoke the sentence past upon him. But when this request had been once denied him, he acquiesces in the justice of the sentence, and not a murmur escapes his lips. As his end approaches, he devotes the greater part of his time to admonishing Israel, and instructing them in the things of God. He at length receives the command to go up to the top of Pisgah and die, and no sooner is it received, than it is obeyed. With the praises of God in his mouth, he ascends the hill, and cheerfully meets his end.

Here then we may learn a lesson of meek submission to the will of God. It is not indeed wrong to feel the smart of afflictions. Insensibility under them is not only unnatural, but sinful, for it subverts the purposes for which they are sent to us. Moses felt sorrow and pain, when he was forbidden to enter Canaan; and a greater than Moses had his soul troubled at the thought of approaching suffering. Neither is it wrong to beseech the Almighty to withdraw from us the chastisements with which he has visited us. Moses besought the Lord that he might be allowed to go over Jordan; and what was the language of the suffering Jesus? "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." This was the beginning of the Saviour's prayer, but mark how he ended it; "Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." "O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me except I drink it, thy will be done." We see no insensibility here, no despising of the chastening of the Lord. We see, on the contrary, the liveliest, the deepest feeling. But then this feeling is attended with a spirit of entire submission. Let the same spirit live and reign in you. It carried Moses to the top of Pisgah; it led Jesus to the cross. Entreat the Spirit of God to fix it in your hearts; and it will lead you rejoicing through all the changes and chances of your wearisome pilgrimage. It will lighten the burden of sorrow; it will cheer the hour of sickness; it will enable you to go down to the grave in peace.

Aim to have no will, brethren, but the will of God. Learn to put this question to yourselves, "Should it be according to my mind?" Learn to take these words of the prophet into your lips, "I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him." What, though you are poor, and sick, and afflicted; are you not sinners? and ought you not to wonder that your afflictions are so light, while your sins are so heavy? "Wherefore doth a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?" "It is of the Lord's mercies, that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not." Every breath we draw is a wonder of mercy, a miracle of patience. If we know anything of our real character, we must acknowledge that we deserve all the piercing anguish of eternity. O then let us never murmur against the Lord, because he sends us the light afflictions of time!

IV. This history reminds us also, that *the death of the servants of God, with all the circumstances connected with it, is ordered by the Lord.*

Moses is commanded on a certain day to go to Pisgah, a certain place, and there to wait the approach of death. After his eyes were closed in death, even his lifeless body was not forsaken. Perhaps to prevent the Israelites from paying idolatrous worship at his tomb, as well as to do honour to his servant, it was buried in some unknown place by God himself.

Equally “precious in the sight of the Lord, is the death of all his saints.” Not only is the will of God concerned in the general sentence of mortality pronounced upon them, but death always receives from him a particular commission, before he dares approach to hurt them. It is the Lord that appoints the time, the manner, and the place, of their departure; and he determines these by rules of unsearchable wisdom, as well as of love. There are undoubtedly great and wise reasons, why the death of every saint is appointed at this or that particular season, and in this or that particular manner; why some trees of righteousness are soon removed from the world, and transplanted into the paradise of God green and young, while others are suffered to remain here to a good old age. These reasons however are at present hidden from our eyes; but what we know not now, we shall know hereafter, and, in the meanwhile, all things are working together for our good. With this assurance let us be satisfied. Our times are in the Lord’s hands; he measures out every day to us; and will not allow death to touch us, till the hour he appoints for our change is come. Our Bibles tell us that he disposes of the meanest and smallest concerns of our life; how much more then of life itself! If a hair of our heads cannot fall to the ground without our Father, much less can we ourselves fall without him. We may conclude therefore that we shall go down to the grave at the very moment and in the very manner, that will be most conducive to the honour of our Redeemer and the welfare of our souls.

V. The last truth of which the text reminds us, is this—*The people of God may confidently expect from him support and comfort in the hour of death.*

Moses had sinned against the Lord, and though his sin had been pardoned as far as regarded another world, he must die. Yet the God against whom he had sinned, did not suffer his servant to close his eyes without a manifestation of his loving-kindness towards him. He met him on the summit of the hill, where he had appointed him to die; he “spake unto him there, as a man speaketh unto his friend;” and showed him all the country of Canaan. He saw the land of promise stretching itself before his eyes, and whilst gazing on the prospect, he fell asleep. But O what a blessed transition did he experience! He is taken indeed from one of the fairest earthly prospects that ever eye beheld; but his soul flies to the enjoyment of a still fairer inheritance, eternal in the heavens. He loses sight of

the plains of Canaan and the goodly tents of Jacob, but he sees the plains of heaven and the throne of God.

Thus did the Lord cheer the heart of Moses in the hour of death, and thus does he generally cheer his servants. It is indeed a fearful thing to die. Even the righteous often shrink from the dreary path which is to lead them through the grave to their desired home, and wish that heaven could be entered by some other way. All attempts to reconcile nature to her own dissolution are vain. Who can love to be, as it were, torn in two; to have a wide separation made between the soul and the body; to have one part of him in an eternal world, while the other is lying in oblivion in the earth, and turning to corruption and to dust? In such an hour, flesh and heart must fail; the soul must need support; and they who fear the Lord, shall find all the grace and help they need. He who was with Moses, will be with them, as “the strength of their heart and their portion for ever.” The Lord has said to each of his saints, “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee;” and surely this promise will not be broken at the very time when the performance of it is most needed. What was the language of the believing David to his God? “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me: thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

But God often does more than vouchsafe his presence to his dying saints. He sometimes opens their eyes, and gives them a distant prospect of the glories of the heavenly Canaan, as he showed to Moses the plains, the valleys, and the palm-trees, of the promised land. How often has the soul of the dying Christian seemed to rise to heaven, even before it could disengage itself from the body! It has been carried to Pisgah, raised above the earth; and heaven, with all its glories, has burst upon its view.

If you, brethren, would enjoy this blessedness on the bed of death, strive to obtain it now. Strive to rise above the present scene, and to look forward to the eternal Canaan. Think of the riches of that goodly land, and your nearness to it. The sighs and struggles of the wilderness are drawing to an end, and you are about to dwell “in a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” Think of the greatness of the change which awaits you. How wonderful the transition! to pass in a moment from this wretched world to the glorious skies! to go from obscurity to honour, from weariness to rest, from sorrow to joy, from a dungeon to a throne!

Does a change like this really await us? Dare we look to it for comfort in the hour of death? To answer this question, we must ask another—How are we living now? If we would die the death of the righteous, we must first learn to live the life of the righteous. If we would die with Moses on Pisgah, within sight of the promised land, we must first, like Moses, turn our backs on a tempting and ensnaring world, and live a life of faith in the Son of God. It is an easy thing for the most ungodly to flatter themselves that they shall die in peace and be safe in eternity; but shall God descend from heaven to fill with joy, and to inspire with

triumphant hope, the heart, which has always been shut against his faith and fear? Shall the angels of light be commissioned to convey to their unsullied abode, the soul which delights only in sin and uncleanness? Shall heaven throw open its gates to admit the child of hell? Never. "The wicked shall be cast into hell, and all the people that forget God." "The righteous hath hope in his death, but the wicked is driven away in his wickedness."

Lay these things to heart, brethren. You must soon die; and if you continue to live as the greater part of mankind around you are living, death will be to you an hour of misery, and the beginning of an eternity of anguish. Expect to die, not as Moses died, but as thousands are daily dying, stupid and unconcerned, or groaning with terror and remorse. Your bodies will be committed to the tomb and moulder in the dust, but the bitterness of death never will be past. The pangs of sickness and disease may be ended, but the pains of eternal death will never know an end.

Make then your choice. Determine either to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season and the anguish of destruction throughout eternity; or choose rather to suffer affliction for a season with the people of God, and receive with them the recompense of an everlasting reward. God has joined these things together, and we cannot separate them; indeed, if we are really Christians, we shall not wish to separate them. We shall "esteem the reproach of Christ greater riches" than all worldly treasures and enjoyments, and shall rejoice to "go forth unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach." We shall feel that "here we have no continuing city," and we shall "seek one to come." We shall "desire a better country, that is, a heavenly," and we shall live as strangers and pilgrims on the earth. This deadness to the world, this longing after heaven, are inseparably connected with a peaceful death and a happy eternity. If the grace of God has implanted these things in our hearts, we shall "die the death of the righteous," and our "last end will be like his." We may not indeed see so much of Canaan on this side the river of death, as Moses saw of it; but we shall see as much of it on the other side. We shall enter the goodly land, and have our inheritance in it with the Israel of God.