

SERMONS,  
PREACHED  
IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF  
HIGH WYCOMBE.

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BY

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## SERMON XI.

### THE GOODNESS OF GOD TO ISRAEL.

DEUTERONOMY xxxii. 10, 11, 12.

*He found him in a desert land and in the waste howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings; so the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him.*

THESE words are a part of that sublime song which Moses addressed to the children of Israel? a short time before his death. Having called heaven and earth to witness that his words were faithful and true, he tells them that though they were “a perverse and crooked generation,” they had ever been the peculiar objects of Jehovah’s regard; that when he first divided the earth among the tribes of men, though ages were to pass away before Israel could be numbered among the nations, he had even then marked out for them the land of Canaan, and appointed the boundaries of other kingdoms with a reference to their possession of it. In the words of the text he reminds them, that, in conformity with his design of settling them in the land he had thus destined for them, the Almighty had brought them out of Egypt, saved them from the hands of their enemies, supplied their many wants, and led them through the difficulties and dangers of the wilderness to the borders of Canaan.

His beautiful description of the loving-kindness of Jehovah towards the church in the wilderness, may be applied, with equal propriety, to his dealings with his people in every age. Scripture itself warrants the application. We ourselves, brethren, if we have indeed taken Christ for our Saviour and our Guide, are as much concerned in this declaration, as Israel of old; we are as much distinguished and honoured, as they. We are the portion of the Lord; we are the lot of his inheritance. Let us rejoice in that love wherewith the Father has loved us; but let us not be high-minded. The gracious words before us are calculated to humble, as well as to cheer us. They remind us indeed of the goodness of God towards his saints, but then they remind us also of our natural state of degradation and guilt. We may derive from them therefore two subjects of consideration;—the state in which the Almighty finds his servants, and the manner in which he acts towards them.

I. *What then is the state in which God finds his servants?* The text tells us that he found the Israelites “in a desert land, in the waste howling wilderness.”

1. Their condition therefore, if viewed as a picture of the original condition

of man, teaches us, first, that *the people of God were by nature at a great distance from him*. It represents them as once a great way off from their Father's house. Between him and them, it says, was a dreary waste, which it appeared impossible for them ever to pass. The enemies of God by wicked works; transgressors of that unalterable law which declares that "the soul that sinneth, it shall die;" the willing slaves of Satan; tied and bound with the chain of a thousand lusts; with all their affections fixed on sin, and all their desires turned from God—how shall they find him, how approach him? All who have been brought nigh to God by the blood of Christ were once thus far off from him: and he who has not felt this to be his state, is yet a stranger to the grace of Jesus.

2. The condition of the Israelites in the wilderness was, further, *a destitute condition*.

They were in a desert land, in a waste and barren wilderness. The provisions which they brought with them out of Egypt, were exhausted almost as soon as their journey was begun, and the desert afforded them no prospect of a supply. Without food, without water, without a place where to lay their heads, "hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them."

And were not the people of God once as destitute as these Israelites? Let us look back, Christian brethren, to the days that are past. We imagined that we had need of nothing, but what was our real condition? We were wretched and miserable, poor and naked, ready to perish. The world appeared fair before us; it promised us much, and we were willing to credit it. Fools that we were, we tried it; but what could it do for us? It gave us, among its briars and thorns, a few flowers to amuse us, but it left us starving for want. It brought us no pardon for our guilt, no peace for an accusing conscience, no deliverance from the grave, no refuge from hell. It left us destitute, forlorn, and wretched.

3. The state in which the Almighty finds his people, is, thirdly, *a state of danger*.

The wilderness was dangerous to Israel, as well as barren and desert. It was a "howling wilderness," full of ravenous beasts, which roamed about it with hideous yellings. It was a "terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents and scorpions." The defenceless Israelites had to contend also with formidable enemies. Many of them perished by the arms of Sihon and Og, and many more by the allurements of Balaam and Balak.

Equally dangerous is the condition of the servants of God in the world. It is the territory of an enemy who goes about "seeking whom he may devour." They are the inhabitants of a country which is at war with the only Being who can bestow mercy and grace on their souls. They are surrounded by thousands who have formed a league with the prince of darkness to rob the Redeemer of his jewels, and to drag to destruction the people whom he is anxious to save. It is indeed impossible to contemplate without wonder the escape of any sinner from the dangers which surround him in the world. The more we know of our own

hearts, of their earthly and sensual nature; the more we know of the world, of its unconquerable hatred to vital godliness, and its almost irresistible influence over our own minds; the more shall we tremble at the greatness of the danger from which we have been rescued, dread the snares which surround us, and wonder at our escape.

This then is the state in which the Lord Jehovah finds his people in the world. It is a state of distance from God, of the greatest want, of the most fearful danger. This is the wretched wilderness into which we and all mankind have wandered, and from which none but an almighty arm can deliver us. We may not indeed be aware of our condition. We may feel no want, and suspect no danger. Our bodies may be clothed and fed. We may deem all our spiritual necessities supplied. And yet, brethren, our souls may be in a desert, in a wilderness that borders upon hell.

II. Let us now proceed to our second subject of consideration, and enquire *in what manner the Almighty acts towards his people in this wretched and dangerous condition.*

His conduct towards them is illustrated in the text by the conduct of the eagle towards her young. This bird is said to bear a peculiarly strong affection to her offspring, and to manifest this affection in a very extraordinary manner. When she considers them sufficiently strong to leave their nest, she stirs it up or disturbs it, in order to induce them to quit it; and, at the same time, she flutters over them, that they may be encouraged to try their wings, and be instructed in the use of them. If these means do not succeed in drawing them from their nest, it is said that she spreads abroad her wings, and placing her young on them, she soars with them into the air, and then gliding from under them, she compels them to endeavour to bear themselves up, and attempt to fly. If however she perceives that they are unable to sustain themselves in the air, she darts under them, and receiving them again on her wings, prevents their fall, and places them once more in their nest.

This beautiful similitude strikingly illustrates the tenderness with which the Almighty led Israel from Egypt to Canaan, and the loving-kindness which he still manifests towards all who seek him in the wilderness of this world. It shows us what he does for them, and how he does it.

1. It shows us *what God does for his people.*

It tells us that *he afflicts them.* As the eagle disturbs her young in their nest, so the Lord suffers not his children to remain at ease in the world; but renders them dissatisfied with it, and thus leads them to seek a better country.

Is affliction then a blessing? It was so to Israel. Their nest was stirred up in Egypt; there the arm of a cruel tyrant was lifted up against them; and what was the consequence? They desired and obtained deliverance from the house of their bondage. They were dealt with in the same manner in the desert. He who had

opened a passage for them through the Red Sea, could have made the waste and howling wilderness blossom as a rose before them, and led them along a fruitful and pleasant path to Canaan. But such a path would have ruined Israel. The foolish people would have lingered in the country, built their tabernacles in it, and thought no more of the promised land.

But why need we enquire of these favoured people whether it is good for a sinner to be afflicted? Cannot our own experience decide the question? Give it what name we may, be it in its nature joyous or grievous, is not that a blessing, which makes us dissatisfied with worldly enjoyments and worldly sins and follies? Is not that a blessing, which forces the wandering prodigal to think of the home he has forsaken, and brings him back again to his father's arms? O brethren, if poverty and sorrow, if perplexity and trouble, if pain and sickness, will but wean our hearts from this wretched earth, and cause our souls to long for heaven; if they will but force the heart to feel, and the tear of penitence and love to flow; if they will but promote and sweeten our communion with God, and make us more meet for the enjoyment of him in his kingdom; let us ever regard them as blessings, let us welcome them as friends; let us be thankful for tribulation. When tempted to consider our light afflictions as evils, let us look back on the days that are past, and let each of us put these questions to himself—Where should I have been now, what would have been my present character and condition, if my God had never visited me with suffering and sorrow? What would have been my hope? what my eternal home?

The figure in the text teaches us also that *the Lord guides the people* who are the lot of his inheritance.

When the eagle has stirred up her nest, she flutters over her young as their instructor and leader; and thus, we are told, the Lord led Israel about and instructed him. In a miraculous cloud and pillar, he went before him in the pathless desert, and led him “by a right way to a city of habitation.”

Now we need a guide to heaven, as much as these Israelites needed a guide to Canaan. We have wandered to an awful distance from God, and though a way back to him has been opened, we know not where to find it nor how to walk in it. But as soon as we feel the misery and evil of our wanderings, he who came down from heaven to seek and to save the lost, vouchsafes to be our conductor. He takes us by the hand, and leads us on step by step through a world of misery, till he brings us into a world of glory. Not that we can always discern his guiding hand, or always perceive that the road in which he is leading us, is the road to God. The path of life is often a mysterious path, and he who walks in it, will soon be taught that he must walk by faith and not by sight. Our ignorance makes it mysterious; but when we have arrived at the end of it, and look back on “all the way wherein the Lord our God has led us in the wilderness to humble us and to prove us,” we shall see that we have been led by the right and the best way to the land of rest. “I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not, saith the

Lord. I will lead them in paths that they have not known. I will make darkness light before them, and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them.”

We are reminded, further, by the words of Moses, that *the Lord preserves his people*, watches over and defends them.

The eagle does not desert her feeble young when she sees them sinking in the air, but flies to their aid, and bears them up on her wings. Neither did the Father of Israel desert his children in the wilderness. “He kept them as the apple of his eye.” He visited them indeed with judgments, but he suffered none of their enemies to harm them; and as for his own judgments, they were for the greater part only fatherly chastisements.

Thus also does he continue to watch over his spiritual Israel. The Christian pilgrim has still the mighty God for his Preserver, as well as for his Guide. Surrounded by a thousand dangers, and forced to war with a thousand enemies, as long as he is conscious of his own weakness and flies to his God for refuge, he is as safe, as though there were not a single danger or a single enemy in his path. And what, if he be led into new and untried scenes of difficulty and sorrow? What, if he be brought into fiery afflictions? They may alarm, but they cannot injure him. They may instruct and benefit him, and help him forward on his sacred journey, but they cannot tear his soul from the hand of God.

There are indeed some seasons in the Christian’s pilgrimage, in which he finds it difficult to believe that God has not forsaken him. Affliction heaped upon affliction presses on his head; the consolations which he once enjoyed, are withdrawn; his way seems hedged up with thorns; and all around him is mystery and darkness. And yet at the very moment when he is well-nigh borne down with the weight of his sorrows and perplexities, and can scarcely lift up a last and almost despairing cry for help, he feels the everlasting arm of Jehovah placed underneath him; he sees his before invisible hand guiding him in the wilderness; he hears his voice saying to his fainting soul, “Fear thou not, for I am with thee; be not dismayed, for I am thy God. I have redeemed thee; I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee. When thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned, neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.”

2. But *in what manner* does the Lord thus afflict, guide, and defend his servants?

He exercises his mercy towards them *constantly*. Not that he is ever afflicting his children. It is true that he loves them too well to withhold affliction from them when they need it; but he will never continue it one moment longer than their spiritual wants require. But though his afflictive mercies may endure only for a season, his guiding and preserving care is never withdrawn from his church. “He withdraweth not his eye from the righteous,” says Job. “Behold,”

says David, “he that keepeth Israel neither slumbereth nor sleepeth.” In some season of perplexity and fear, Zion may say, “The Lord hath forsaken me and my Lord hath forgotten me;” but what is the answer of Zion’s God? “Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, they may forget, yet will not I forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me.”

The Lord exercises his mercy towards his servants *patiently*. With what patience and gentleness did he lead his ancient people to Canaan?

Numerous as were their provocations, for forty years the guiding pillar never forsook them. Its progress too was regulated according to the weakness and infirmities of the people whom it was leading. When they were weary, it rested; and when they were collecting their manna, preparing and eating it, it stood still and hurried them not.

And does not this pillar remind us of the patience and gentleness of one, who “feedeth his flock like a shepherd, who gathereth the lambs with his arm and carrieth them in his bosom, and gently leadeth those that are with young?” No other guide could be thus patient towards us. The meekest man upon earth, yea, the most compassionate angel in heaven, could not thus bear with us. Our continual and aggravated provocations would soon force them to leave us. But God does not leave us; Christ does not forsake us. He who once “bore our sins in his own body on the tree,” bears with our infirmities now; and when the Christian recollects how long and how patiently he has borne with him, and how gently and tenderly he is leading him to glory, his heart is filled with wonder, and his tongue ready to sing aloud with praise.

The similitude in the text reminds us, lastly, that the loving-kindness which God exercises towards his people, he exercises *with delight*, with the same pleasurable feelings with which a tender-hearted parent watches over and provides for his child. What the Almighty does for his pardoned children, he does, “not grudgingly nor of necessity,” but bountifully and cheerfully, with the affection of a father as well as the liberality of a prince. The Bible tells us that the Lord “delighteth” in the mercy which he pours out on them that seek him, and “waiteth” and, as it were, longeth “to be gracious” unto them. It warrants us to conclude that his chief delight is not in the angels who surround his throne with rapturous hallelujahs, but in that broken-hearted, contrite sinner, who comes to him fearing his name, mourning over his rebellion against him, and thirsting for his salvation. “The Lord taketh pleasure,” says the psalmist, “in them that fear him, in those that hope in his mercy.” And this is the promise which he himself makes to his servants by his prophet, “I will rejoice over them to do them good, and I will plant them in this land assuredly, with my whole heart and with my whole soul.”

The review which we have thus taken of the goodness of God to his ancient people, is calculated to remind his spiritual Israel of many grounds of consolation and thankfulness. It suggests to them also a lesson which they sometimes find it difficult to learn, but which, when it is once learned, can keep the most troubled soul in peace. It calls upon them *to trust implicitly in God*, and it shows them a solid foundation on which to build their confidence. It assures them that the Lord will not suffer his portion to be lost, nor his inheritance to be impaired; that he will not suffer the people whom he has formed for himself, and on whom he has lavished so much grace, to be ruined by the calamities of this life, or touched by the miseries of another. He has already removed the sorrows of eternity far from them, and as for “the afflictions of this present time,” the text declares that he has turned them into blessings. It tells us that the trials which seem so grievous to us, are only a part of our purchased inheritance; that our heaviest sorrows are among our highest privileges.

Surely then it becomes us to receive every cup of affliction at least with patience and submission. It becomes not a child to indulge a fearful, disconsolate, murmuring spirit, while receiving blessings from the hand of a father. O if there be a creature in the universe, who has reason to trust in God and to hope in his mercy, it is that inhabitant of the earth, whom affliction has stopped in his thoughtless career of sin, whom sorrow has taught to pray, whom adversity has led to seek in Christ a refuge, a Comforter, and a Saviour! Instead of drawing from painful trials, frowning providences, and perplexing difficulties, grounds for fear, such a man has reason to rejoice exceedingly in tribulation, to weep with gratitude, and to burn with love. Though he is in the waste and howling wilderness of the world, there is not an angel in heaven so rich in mercies as he, nor so beloved by his God; none whose inheritance in eternity is more glorious or more secure. As long as he continues to love and fear the Lord, he has not only his mercy and goodness to encourage him, he has his faithfulness, yea, his oath and his eternal purpose, to rejoice in. In every hour of suffering and sorrow, he has these words of his Saviour to think of and depend on; “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” He has these words of the psalmist, to think of and use as his own; “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.” “I am continually with thee, O Lord; thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me by thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory.”

But there is another class of persons to whom the subject before us speaks; yea, it speaks to us all, and calls upon us to enquire whether we have any part in the blessedness we have been contemplating, whether the happiness of Israel is our own. It is not all mankind, to whom the Lord is thus rich in goodness. “His tender mercies indeed are over all his works,” and there is not a sinner living on the earth, who is not a monument of his goodness, and a marvellous

instance of his mercy. But then the loving-kindness which is spoken of in the text, is that special loving-kindness, that peculiar mercy, which he manifests only to his spiritual Israel; to those whom he has chosen in Christ out of mankind, and brought, by his grace, out of that state of distance from him, of danger and want, in which he found them, into a state of union with himself, of pardon, security, and peace. Now if we are included in the number of these happy people, we have felt ourselves to be in a guilty, and consequently in a needy and perishing condition; and we have fled to Christ as ruined sinners to a Saviour. We have learned to hope in him, and to tread in his footsteps. We have his Spirit reigning within us, and we are in some degree like him. If we have been visited with afflictions, they have done more for us, than fill our breasts with sorrow and our eyes with tears; they have softened our hearts, taught us more of our sinfulness and weakness, weaned us from the world, and made us long for heaven. If these feelings have not been excited within us, and if these fruits of the Spirit are not visible in our dispositions and lives, we are not the portion of the Lord, we are not the lot of his inheritance. The God of Israel is not leading us to heaven, but we are following another guide to another and a very different place. We have Satan for our leader, and the land of darkness for our home.

And yet, brethren, it is awful to think how easy many of us remain under such guidance, and with this dreadful prospect before us. We are far more careless and unconcerned, though travelling in the road to destruction, than they are, who are journeying to a land of life and rest. Whence arises our lightness of heart? Have we really made a wiser choice than the people of God? Is the guide we have chosen a better guide than Christ? Has he a stronger arm to protect us? Does he afford us greater consolation, and will he lead us to a happier place? Alas, no ! Destruction and misery are in his ways, and his footsteps go down unto death. It is our thoughtlessness, not our security, which keeps us so easy. It is our awful insensibility, which hardens our hearts, and blinds our eyes to the evils that surround us. But this thoughtlessness and this insensibility will not last for ever. When the journey of life is done, they will come to an everlasting end, and we know by what they will be succeeded—by the pangs of that worm which dieth not, and of that fire which is not quenched.

Strive then to be serious and thoughtful now, when seriousness may be made the means of leading you to Christ, and thoughtfulness to heaven. Pray for a feeling heart. Welcome the bitterest afflictions which, through grace, may force you to think of your souls and eternity. Be thankful for everything which has a tendency to render you dissatisfied with the ways of sin, and to lead you to seek the paths of wisdom and God. These paths are lying open before you, if you have but a sincere desire to walk in them; and there is a Holy Spirit appointed and waiting to lead you to them, to guide your wandering feet into the way of peace. Commit yourselves therefore to his gracious guidance. Seek it by prayer.

You will not seek it in vain. He will restore your wandering soul, and lead you “in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” He will instruct you, as he leads you about; and when he has taught you all that the waste and howling wilderness is designed to teach you, he will remove you from its agitating scenes, and place you in the peaceful and blessed paradise of your God.