SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

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BY

THE REV. CHARLES BRADLEY,

VICAR OF GLASBURY, BRECKNOCKSHIRE; AND MINISTER OF

ST. JAMES’S CHAPEL, CLAPHAM, SURREY.

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THE NINTH EDITION.

VOL. I.

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LONDON: :

PRINTED FOR HAMILTON, ADAMS, AND CO.

PATERNOSTER-ROW.

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1833.

SERMON XII.

THE CHRISTIAN JOURNEYING TO THE PROMISED LAND.

Numbers x. 29.

*We are journeying unto the place, of which the Lord said, I will give it you. Come thou with us, and we will do thee good, for the Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel.*

The place referred to in these words, was the promised land of Canaan. The Israelites were now preparing to leave mount Sinai, and to renew their journey through the wilderness to this long wished for country. Before however they finally leave the mount, we find Moses endeavouring to prevail on Hobab, his brother-in-law, to accom­pany them in their pilgrimage, and to share in the promised advantages of their future home. “Come thou with us,” he says, “and we will do thee good, for the Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel.”

Such was the primary meaning of the words before us; but the general tenor of scripture when referring to the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness to Canaan, will perhaps justify us in viewing them in another and a more spiritual light. They may be considered as af­fording us a simple but striking emblem of the state and conduct of the Christian in the world. He is here in a wilderness; the Lord has promised him beyond it a land of rest; he is journeying to this land, and would have all men become his fellow-travellers in the way which leads to it.

Viewed in this light, the text furnishes us with three subjects of consideration;—the place spoken of in it; the conduct of the Christian with respect to this place; and the advice which he gives to others as he journeys towards it.

I. *The place spoken of in the text* is Canaan, a type of heaven, that far distant but better country which all the Israel of God have ever regarded as the scene of their blessedness and their home.

1. Hence it is, first, *a much wished for place.* It is a place to which the Christian is journeying, and consequently a place which he wishes to reach. Like the saints of old, he desires “a better country, even a heavenly.” He is really anxious to be in heaven, and would gladly leave the world and go there.

This desire is not natural to us. As long as our hearts remain in an unrenewed state, we feel nothing of this earnest longing after heaven. We are in fact altogether indifferent about it. We know indeed that we must die, and we wish to go to heaven when we die; but why do we wish to go there? Because we love heaven, and are thirsting for its joys? No; because we can­not remain any longer upon earth, and are not willing to endure the pains of hell. If we could remain here, though we feel that we are in a wilderness, here we should be anxious to remain, and be content to let heaven be peopled from some other world. Only let us stay on the earth, and give us our full share of its vanities, plea­sures, and riches, and we will willingly leave to the angels the joys of the heavenly kingdom.

The cause of this indifference must be sought for in the earthliness and sensuality of our minds. We have lost that holy and heavenly principle which was at first implanted in our souls, and are become almost as low and grovelling in our de­sires as the brutes that perish.

Now the gospel provides a remedy for this earthly-mindedness. It speaks to us not only of mercy to save the soul, but of grace to change the heart. It offers to bring back to the mind the principle it has lost, to lift its affections from the world, and to fix them on heaven and God.

Nothing but the gospel can effect this change, and none but the man who loves the gospel, has experienced it; yea, none other heartily desires it. It would mar all the sensual enjoyments of every other man, throw a sickening draught into his cup of pleasure, and make him turn with disgust from his much loved follies. Others may talk of heaven, and say that they wish to be there; but the re­newed Christian is the only man in the world, who understands the nature of its joys, and habitually and heartily desires to have a place in its courts. If we ask how it is that he has thus learned to thirst after that which all other men despise, the answer is plain—he is born from above, and he wants to breathe his native air, and to share in the enjoyments of his native land.

2. The text reminds us too, that heaven is *a promised place.* “We are journeying unto the place, of which the Lord said, I will give it you.”

The heavenly Canaan is as much a land of promise, as the earthly Canaan was. It has been as often and as solemnly promised to the spiritual seed of Abraham, as that goodly land was to his natural seed. “This is the promise,” says the apostle, “that he hath promised us, even eternal life.” And this promise has been made, not only to the believer, but to a greater than he on his behalf. In the councils of eternity, heaven was made over to the anointed Saviour, as an eternal dwelling place for his ransomed church. “In hope,” says Saint Paul, “of eternal life, which God that cannot lie, promised before the world began.”

This divine promise is indeed the ground on which the Christian rests all his hope of life and immortality. The light of nature and the dictates of reason, tell him, it is true, that there may be a world beyond the grave, but it is the Bible which assures him that “verily there is a reward for the righteous;” it is the promise given him in the Bible, which leads him to look, with Saint Peter, for “new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.” He knows that if he has really “fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before him” in the gospel, he is the heir of a pro­mise which has been confirmed by the oath of Jehovah, and which has “the immutability of his counsel” to ensure the fulfilment of it. He draws from it therefore “strong consolation,” and derives from it a hope which is “as an anchor to his soul, sure and steadfast.”

But why has the Almighty given the Christian this precious promise of everlasting life? Not because the Christian has merited this or even the smallest blessing at his hands, but simply for this purpose, to magnify the riches of his grace.

3. Hence we may observe that the country which is promised to the believer, is *the free gift of God.* It is a place, concerning which the Lord has said, “I will give it you.”

The Israelites were frequently warned against supposing that the land of Canaan was marked out for them on account of any goodness which the Lord saw in them; and the people who are travelling to the heavenly country, are as often reminded that it is not in consequence of any merit or righteousness of theirs, that they will be allowed to enter into it. Eternal life is always represented in the scriptures as the gift of God through Jesus Christ, our Lord; not as a gift partly merited, but as a gift wholly undeserved, given to the believing sinner as freely as the rain which falls down from heaven, is given to the earth. “By grace are ye saved,” says the apos­tle, “through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast.”

This is a very humbling truth, brethren, and a truth which we are very unwilling to believe. We do not like the thought of entering heaven on such terms as these. We know indeed that we are sinners, and we are willing to be treated in some degree as sinners, and could even consent to be saved partly through grace; but then we are not willing to be sunk so low, as to be accounted utterly undeserving, utterly worthless; yea, it is to be feared that the greater part of mankind would rather lose heaven, than receive it solely as a gift of mercy.

This truth however is as important as it is humbling. All the other truths of the gospel rest on it. It lies at the very foundation of all true religion, and no man is a Christian, who has not a heartfelt conviction of it. It must find its way into the understanding and affections, or the soul must be lost. We must not only perceive the neces­sity of entering the kingdom of God in the same humiliating way as the pardoned criminal on the cross entered it, but be willing to enter it in this way, rather than in any other. We must approve this way, love it, yea, glory in it.

But though heaven is thus a free gift to the Christian, it is still, in one sense, a purchased possession. It was obtained for him by a costly price, even by the blood of him who now reigns in its courts, and gives it all its joys. Christ pur­chased the church with his own blood, and with the same price he purchased for his church an “inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, eternal in the heavens.”

This then is the place spoken of in the text. It is a much wished for place, a promised place, and a place which is the free gift of God.

II. Let us proceed to consider, secondly, *the conduct of the Christian with regard to this place.*

It is evident that this heavenly country has little or no influence on mankind in general. We profess to believe that there is such a land some­where in the universe, but we think and act just as though it could nowhere be found. If heaven were to be blotted out from the creation, or if an impassable gulf were to be fixed between it and the earth, our dispositions, our affections, and our conduct, would, in too many instances, remain the same as they are now. But this promised land has a real and abiding influence on the people of God. They seek it; they travel towards it. “We are journeying unto the place, of which the Lord said, I will give it you.”

1. To be journeying to heaven implies *an ac­tual entrance into the path which leads to it.*

The Christian’s desires after this goodly land have not ended in a few lazy wishes and languid prayers. They have excited him to action. The man has been roused from his spiritual unconcern; he has been led to see the vanity of the world and all it possesses; he has begun to make enquiries about a way to some better country; he has been shown and taught this way by the Spirit of God; in the strength of the same Spirit, he has actually entered in at its strait gate, and become a traveller towards Zion.

Hence it is plain that the Christian, at the very commencement of his course, gives up the world, turns his back on Egypt, and sets his face towards Canaan. No man must think himself a Christian traveller, till he has done this. Heaven and the world are places directly opposed to each other in the holy scriptures. We are repeatedly warn­ed against the folly of seeking both at the same time. We are plainly told that it is impossible to be travelling to the one, while we are dwelling contentedly in the other.

2. To be journeying to heaven implies also *perseverance in seeking it.*

It is not the entering into a high road, that will bring a man to the end of his journey, but an active and continued travelling along it. Nothing less than forty years of patient labour and exertion brought Israel to Canaan. The kingdom of hea­ven must be sought with the same perseverance, or we shall never arrive there. We must travel on in “the narrow way which leadeth unto life,” as well as enter it.

We are too apt, brethren, to forget this truth. We seem to think that religion is the business of a few days or weeks only; that when we have passed through a certain train of feelings, and embraced a certain system of doctrines, all is done and over; that the work of conversion is finished, our salvation completed, and heaven made our own. But how unscriptural are these thoughts! The Bible plainly tells us that our whole life must be a life of faith, of repentance, of wrestling and warfare. It intimates to us that the oldest and strongest servant of God has just as much need to “work out his salvation with fear and trembling,” as the youngest and weak­est; that he has just as much need of sorrow for sin, of earnest prayer, of continual applica­tion to the cross, of the most striving exertion. The Bible goes still farther.

3. We are warranted to infer from it, that if we are journeying to heaven, we have not only kept in the road which leads to heaven, but *have actually made a progress in it;* that, instead of declining, we are growing in grace; that we are gradually becoming more and more meet to be partakers of heaven, the nearer we draw to it.

“The path of the just,” it says, “is as the shi­ning light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.” “The righteous shall hold on his way, and he that hath clean hands, shall be stronger and stronger.” There is no standing still in religion. We are either slowly climbing up the hill of Zion, or rapidly hurrying down it. If we are conscious that we are not gradually ascend­ing it, we can surely have no reason to hope that we shall ever reach the city of God on its sum­mit.

It is however an easy thing to be aware of having lost our “first love,” and yet to retain our presumptuous confidence. It is an easy thing to be for years strangers to the tear of penitence, and to feel nothing of the energy of faith, and yet to rank ourselves still in the number of the elect. But the only religion which will bring peace to a man’s heart in the hour of affliction and death, and bear the fiery trial of the day of judgment, is that which is on the whole a growing religion; which deepens day by day the workings of repentance and faith within us; which enlarges year by year our views of our own depravity and Jehovah’s grace; which makes the fire of devo­tion burn with a purer and brighter flame the longer it remains on the altar of the heart, and fixes the soul more and more closely on its God. We are not indeed to suppose that this religion never receives a temporary check, or that the man who possesses it, is always aware of its progress in his mind; but we have the authority of scrip­ture for concluding, that, notwithstanding occa­sional declensions, it is habitually going on unto perfection; that it is a plant which will strike its roots deeper, and send its branches higher, and bring forth in its season more abundant fruit, till it is removed to the paradise of God.

4. There is implied also in journeying to the heavenly Canaan, a *fixed determination to arrive there.* The expression intimates decision of cha­racter; a willingness to sacrifice everything, so that the soul may be saved and heaven won.

Now this is not a common frame of mind, and yet the scriptures give us no reason to think that we are going to heaven, if we do not possess it. It is true, the Bible says that heaven is the free gift of God, and that no man can do anything whatsoever towards meriting it; but yet this sa­cred volume as plainly declares that the gift will be bestowed on him only who is making it the great business of his life to obtain it. Half mea­sures are seldom attended with the desired suc­cess even in the common affairs of life; but how much less likely are they to succeed, when flesh and blood are to be wrestled with and overcome, when the immortal soul is to be saved, and a crown of eternal glory to be obtained!

Are we then, my brethren, making it the one thing needful, the great object of our hopes and fears, to enter into the kingdom of God? If this is indeed our conduct, we shall find that we have no time to trifle, as the world around us is trifling. We shall act like men on a journey which requires diligence and haste. We shall appear among our brethren as strangers and pilgrims, and declare by our conduct that we are seeking another country. We shall obey that command of the Bible, which calls upon us to “lay aside every weight and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and run with patience the race that is set before us; looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.”

III. In thus prosecuting his sacred journey to heaven, it is evident that the Christian must necessarily separate himself from many of his brethren, with whom he would otherwise have contentedly associated. But although he is con­strained by the command of his God and the very nature of the work in which he is engaged, to come out from among the ungodly and worldly, he does not consider himself as unconnected with them, nor does he cease to regard them as bre­thren. Moses dared not return with Hobab to his idols, yet we find him manifesting the greatest anxiety for Hobab’s happiness. “Come thou with us,” he says, “and we will do thee good.”

1. If we regard this invitation as *the advice of the Christian traveller to his fellow-sinners around him,* it implies, first, that *he has a sincere and earnest desire to bring them into that path to hea­ven, which he has himself entered.*

The Christian is not, he cannot be, a selfish being. That very love which saves him from spiritual and eternal death, constrains him to “live no longer unto himself,'” it enlarges his soul, and fills it with the purest and most exalted benevo­lence. As soon therefore as he begins in good earnest to seek heaven for himself, he begins to desire that others also may seek it. He wishes for companions in his pilgrimage, and he invites and urges all around him to join him in his jour­ney; yea, there is not a human being on the earth, whom he would not rejoice to see treading the same way of pleasantness in which he is walk­ing, and sharing with him the blessedness of the same path of peace.

We are sadly negligent, brethren, in the per­formance of this duty. We seem indeed to have almost forgotten that it is our duty to be deeply and tenderly concerned for the eternal happiness of others. We think it wrong to suffer their bo­dily wants to remain unrelieved, but as for the wants of their souls, we hardly think of them. We may indeed lament at seasons their ignorance and folly, and when they die, we may wish that they had died Christians; but sighs and wishes are not all that Christ requires at our hands. He reminds us of what he has done for our own souls. He points to the manger and the cross, and tells us to let the same mind be in us, that was in him. He bids us deny ourselves for the salvation of our brethren, to labour in the work, and, if need be, to suffer contradiction, shame, and reproach, rather than desist from it.

And even if this command had not been ex­pressly given us, a regard to our own happiness might have suggested it to us. If we succeed in persuading others to join us in our journey to Canaan, we win souls, not only to Christ, but to ourselves also;we increase the number of those who are the fellow-helpers of our joy. Those whom we prevail on to travel with us, “may be to us instead of eyes;” they may guide us, assist and comfort us, in our wearisome pilgrimage. We shall take “sweet counsel together, and walk unto the house of God in company.” Who can tell how much we shall be animated by their love and zeal? how much the languid spirit of devotion within us will be quickened by their burning hearts? how much we shall be cheered in our spiritual trials by their sympathy and prayers? And O who can say what our reward will be when we enter heaven? “They that be wise,” says the scripture, “shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteous­ness, as the stars for ever and ever.”

Neither is success in this labour of love so diffi­cult to be attained, as our slothful and faithless hearts sometimes represent it. It is true that the chain which ties our brethren to the world, is too strong to be broken by our feeble arm; but there is a Holy Spirit who has strengthened many an arm weak and feeble as our own, and enabled it to deliver many a wretched sinner from his bond­age. A sense of our weakness is indeed one of the very best qualifications with which we can begin this arduous work; but then let us remem­ber also, that with “the Lord Jehovah is everlast­ing strength;” that this almighty Being is himself interested in our success; that he desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather, that he should turn from his wickedness and live; that he has said to every one of us who is seeking his glory and the salvation of his sinful creatures, “Fear not, thou worm Jacob, and ye men of Israel; I will help thee, saith the Lord and thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. Thou shalt thresh the mountains, and beat them small, and shalt make the hills as chaff.”

We may remember too for our encouragement, that many who have at first turned a deaf ear to the invitations and warnings of pious friendship, have at length listened to them. The bread has been cast upon the waters, and we have thought it lost, but after many days it has been found again. We are told that Hobab refused at first to accom­pany Moses to Canaan. He said unto him, “I will not go, but I will depart to mine own land and to my kindred;” yet Moses was not discou­raged by this refusal. He still entreated, and reasoned, and promised; and there is some ground to suppose from a passage in the fourth chapter of the book of Judges, that he finally prevailed. Let his success encourage us to be as zealous and persevering as he was, and to be as unwilling to take a denial. Our feeble efforts may be blessed at a time when we least expect a blessing; yea,though we may go down to the grave without seeing the fruit of our labours, our labours may not be in vain. Our words may be remembered, when we are almost forgotten, and the soul of our friend may be saved; our child or parent, our husband or wife, may be snatched as a brand from the burning, and may be through eternity our companion in glory, our joy and our crown.

2. The invitation of Moses intimates also that *the Christian is tenderly concerned for the spiritual welfare and happiness of his fellow-travellers,* as well as for the repentance and salvation of the wandering sinner.

Moses not only said to Hobab, “Come thou with us,” but he adds to this invitation a pro­mise, “We will do thee good.” “We will not make light of you or neglect you; we will not regard you as a stranger after you have joined the camp of Israel, but we will treat you as a brother and a friend.” “And it shall be, if thou go with us, yea, it shall be, that what goodness the Lord shall do unto us, the same will we do unto thee.”

The spirit which dictated these words, is the same spirit that reigns in every Christian's heart, He desires to do good not in an ungodly world only, but also in his Redeemer’s church. Hence he watches over his fellow-pilgrims in their jour­ney, not that he may gratify a proud and censo­rious spirit by the discovery of their failings, but that he may decide the wavering among them, stir up the slothful, comfort the feeble-minded, and support the weak. Like his compassionate Mas­ter, he enters into the difficulties, fears, and sor­rows, of those who are travelling to Zion; he bears their burdens, and “so fulfils the law of Christ.”

3. We may infer, lastly, from this invitation, that if we would ever reach the kingdom of God, *we* *must join ourselves now to the people of God.*

“Come thou with us” was the advice given to Hobab. It was only in company with the Israel­ites, that he could share their privileges, and enter into the land which had been marked out for their inheritance; and it is only in the society of those who fear the Lord, that we can taste of the consolations of our God, and draw near to his kingdom. There is no going to heaven in com­pany with those who are going to destruction.

Here then is a lesson for the young. In form­ing your connections and choosing your associates, take those only for your friends, who will consent to walk with you in the way to heaven, and who give you reasonable ground to hope that they will help you forward in your journey to it. It is quite sufficient to have the workings of your own worldly hearts to struggle with on the road. You will always find enough in their temptations to lead you from the path, without calling in to their aid the example and enticements of ungodly com­panions.

And even if this were not the case, even if we could take the thoughtless and sinful as the friends of our youth without being impeded by them in our course, would it be wise to choose for our most beloved associates upon earth, those whom we should dread to meet in another world? with whom we should tremble to have our portion in eternity? It is painful to say farewell, even for a short season, to those whom we love; is there no pang then in bidding an eternal adieu to our bosom friends at the grave? is there no an­guish in shuddering at the very thought of meet­ing them again? We may see in some of the lovers of pleasure around us much to admire, and something perhaps to commend; their conduct may be decent, their dispositions amiable, and their society pleasing; we may love their cheer­fulness and mirth; but in a few fleeting years all these things will have passed away, and nothing will be left to us from our intercourse with them, but the mournful consciousness that we have friends in eternity, whom we shall see no more; that we have friends gone into a world, where no sound of joy has ever yet been heard, nor one ray of hope ever dawned.

It is evident therefore that our present happi­ness, as well as our future safety, is connected with the companions to whom we unite ourselves. Our duty then is plain. Let us love our fellow-sinners and seek to do them good; but if they are determined not to accompany us to heaven, let us not, for the sake of their society and friendship, accompany them to destruction. It may some­times be difficult to avoid connecting ourselves with them; many reasons may be brought forward to persuade us that it is impossible; but let us oppose to all the dictates of cowardice, indiffer­ence, and worldly policy, these plain words of the scripture, “The friendship of the world is enmity with God. Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.” “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers, for what fellowship hath righteousness with unright­eousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? and what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord al­mighty.”

Such are some of the truths, of which the words of Moses in the text are calculated to remind us. It now remains that we apply them to ourselves.

There is one enquiry which seems to be at once suggested to us by the things that we have heard. We are called upon by them seriously to ask whither we are journeying. We know that we are going to the grave. This is a journey which we began as soon as we were born, and we have been ever since unceasingly pursuing it. But what is the grave? It is not the final end of our journey; it is not our home. It is only a narrow pass out of time into eternity. There are two other worlds lying beyond it, a world of everlast­ing blessedness, and another of never ending mi­sery. To the one or the other of these worlds, we are all hourly drawing nearer. We shall soon arrive in one of them, and be lodged in it as our eternal home. O then, brethren, let us put this question seriously to ourselves—Whither are we journeying? Which of these kingdoms of eter­nity are we approaching? Are we standing on the borders of heaven or on the brink of hell? If we are living as mankind in general live, this question is very easily answered—we are hasten­ing to a world of misery. “Wide is the gate,” says Christ, “and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat; because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.” The destruction to which the broad way we are treading in, will lead us, is not indeed the destruction of our being, but it is the destruction of our well-being; it is not the loss of our existence, but the loss of everything which can make that existence a blessing. It is the utter, the everlasting destruction of our hap­piness, and the beginning of an eternity of un­mixed. misery. O what a gloomy end to his journey for a weary traveller to reach! O how wretched a home!

But have we reason to think that we are not walking in this broad way of misery? Have we turned from it with fear and trembling, and are we journeying along the narrow path of life? Then let the promise in the text animate us, and excite us to diligence in our Christian course. We are journeying to the place, of which the Lord has said, “I will give it you.” The way may be narrow, desolate, and dreary; our diffi­culties may be great, and our weakness still greater; but if we lean on that everlasting arm which is underneath us, and “run with patience the race that is set before us,” we are sure of heaven at the end of our journey. Neither can that end be far distant. A few swiftly flying hours will bring us to it, and then we have only to pass over Jordan, and the heavenly Canaan will be ours. Though our course may be weari­some, we shall finish it with joy. As the ran­somed of the Lord, we “shall return and come to Zion, with songs and everlasting joy upon our heads.” We “shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall” for ever “flee away.”