

SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

BY

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SERMON XIII.

THE CHRISTIAN'S SONG IN HIS PILGRIMAGE.

PSALM cxix. 54.

Thy statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage.

THE author of these words appears to have been David. They were probably written towards the close of his life, and seem to have been drawn from him by a review of his past trials and mercies. Happy is the man who can look back on the years that are gone, and take this declaration as his own! That man's sorrows will soon be ended; his songs of joy will last for ever. He may be an afflicted, weeping pilgrim in a wilderness now; but he will be a rejoicing inhabitant of a paradise soon.

The words of the psalmist naturally suggest to us three subjects of consideration;—the light in which every good man regards the world; the cheerfulness which he enjoys as he passes through it; and the source from which this cheerfulness is derived.

I. *The light in which David regarded the world*, was that of a foreign country, through which he was travelling to his native land. He speaks of it as the house or place of his pilgrimage. The world is often represented under this image in the sacred scriptures, and every man who is a Christian indeed, feels the justness of this representation. It comes home at once to his heart, and he wishes always to cherish the feelings which it is calculated to excite. It tells him of something which he loves to hear—his small connection with this world, and his deep interest in another.

1. We may learn from this representation of human life, that the world is *a place which the Christian has ceased to love*. He once loved it. Its maxims and pursuits, its vanities and pleasures, were suited to his depraved affections. He felt himself at home, in a house which he loved, and only wished that he could dwell in it for ever. The dream however is ended. The man is now awake, and views the objects around him in their proper colours. A great moral change has taken place within him. His principles, his dispositions, and his affections, have undergone a radical alteration. He loves not “the world, neither the things that are in the world.” They have lost their charms. Pleasures, amusements, and pursuits, which were once the first objects of his esteem, are now tasteless, wearisome, sickening to his soul.

But whence has this change proceeded? From the disappointments that embitter, and from the calamities that harass, the life of man? No; these indeed he feels in common with other men, but these things have no power to

wean the heart from the world. They have made monks and hermits, but they have never made one Christian.

2. The follower of Jesus regards the world as *a place which cannot make him happy*. The reason why he has ceased to love it, is simply this—it is not suited to his taste; it cannot provide the food which his renewed soul desires. He wants the bread and the water of life, and the world offers him nothing better than husks and ashes.

The taste of that man who is indeed a servant of Christ, is set very high. He has desires in his heart which reach to heaven, and which nothing short of the happiness of heaven can satisfy. Even in this life, he must be made happy in just the same way as the angels are made happy, or he is a stranger to blessedness. He must eat of the same spiritual bread that they eat of, and drink of the same cup that they drink of, or he is still hungry and thirsty, and his soul is fainting within him. He is born from above, and he wants the pleasures of his native land. The world can satisfy the brutes that perish; it can satisfy at times the lover of pleasure and the sensualist; but it cannot satisfy the Christian.

If then we profess to be the followers of Christ, let us remember, not only that we must not seek our chief happiness here, but that we cannot. It is not enough to be separated from the world; we must be weaned from it, lose our love of it, “be transformed by the renewing of our mind.”

3. The words of the psalmist teach us too, that the Christian regards the world as *a place in which he must expect to meet with trials and difficulties*.

A pilgrim in a foreign country reckons on inconveniences, and prepares to meet them. If he cannot have things altogether to his mind, he submits. If he is treated with neglect, it gives him not much concern. He is but a pilgrim; and he looks forward to his home as the seat of his comforts and the place of his rest.

Thus also the Christian expects trials in the house of his pilgrimage, and prepares to experience them. He makes up his mind, when he first enters the path which leads to God, to deny himself and take up his cross. Looking on the world as a fallen world, he wonders not that he finds it a scene of suffering and misery; and he claims no exemption from the common lot of man. The Bible gives him no promise of worldly ease and prosperity. It places his paradise in scenes beyond the grave, and plainly tells him, that he must “through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

4. We may observe, further, that the world is *a place which the Christian expects soon to leave*. It is “the house of his pilgrimage,” not his home. He not only knows that he must die, but he acts consistently with his knowledge—he prepares to die. He endeavours to loosen the cords which attach him to the world, and to be ready to quit it at a moment’s warning. Nay, he is anxious to quit it. He is a weary pilgrim, who longs to be at home.

How often does his heart ache for rest, and sigh for the peace of his Father's house! And yet he travels on in his wearisome journey without a murmur. He is indeed heard at seasons to wish for the wings of a dove, that he may fly away and be at rest; but, the next moment, he checks the impatient prayer, and his language is, "All the days of my appointed time will I wait till my change come."

My brethren, are these feelings ours? Is this the light in which we regard the world? Is it the house of our pilgrimage? Have we ceased to love it, and to expect happiness from it? Do we look on it as a place of trial and difficulty? Are we willing to leave it, that we may go home to heaven? If we are Christians indeed, the world is really thus crucified unto us, and we unto the world. Though living in it, we are not of it. We are travelling to heaven, and so travelling there, as to make the men of the world see that we regard the earth merely as our dwelling place for a season; that we are seeking a better country than any which occupies their thoughts, even a heavenly.

O that these dispositions abounded in all our hearts, and had a greater influence on our conduct! We cannot be Christians without them. This deadness to the world and this heavenly-mindedness are not merely ornamental graces; they are absolutely essential to the Christian character. Nothing can supply the want of them, no zeal for the truth, no form of godliness, no fancied experience of its power. And yet by nature we are utterly destitute of these dispositions. There is nothing spiritual and heavenly in us. We are altogether earthly and sensual. Heavenly-mindedness is as much the gift of God, and as much the work of his Holy Spirit, as repentance or faith. It must be sought for also in the same way. If we would possess it, we must first learn to feel our need of it and earnestly to desire it; and then we must go and ask for it, as a gift of mercy, at a throne of grace.

II. Let us now go on to our next subject of consideration, *the cheerfulness which the Christian enjoys in the house of his pilgrimage*. The text tells us that he has songs in it; "Thy statutes," says David, "have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage."

It has been supposed that there is an allusion in these words to one of the Jewish customs. We are informed that the Israelites repaired three times in the year from the extremities of their country, to worship the God of their fathers in the temple at Jerusalem; and that they had songs composed for these occasions, which they sung at certain intervals as they travelled along.

Thus the Christian pilgrim is represented as singing in his pilgrimage, as journeying on to Zion "with songs and everlasting joy upon his head." It may indeed seem strange that such a pilgrim in such a world should find any cause for joy, yet we know that he does at seasons go on his way rejoicing. He takes

down his harp from the willows; and, even in this strange land, he can sometimes pour forth a song of the sweetest joy, gratitude, and love.

1. His song is a *heartfelt* song.

True religion is something more than a round of ceremonies, or a system of doctrines. It has its seat in the heart, and calls into exercise all its affections. Hence the Christian's joy is a deeply seated joy. It is not a smile on the countenance, whilst sorrow is striving to hide itself in the breast. It is not that lightness of mind, that dissipation of thought, to which worldly amusements give rise. Neither is it a merely intellectual gratification. It is the joy of the mind; the peace of the soul; a joy which can live in retirement, and which flourishes the most, when it is removed at the greatest distance from the gaiety of the world. Serious reflection dashes to pieces the worldling's happiness. It cannot bear the secrecy of the closet and the darkness of midnight. But the Christian's God gives him songs in the night, and as for retirement, it increases his blessedness. He loves his closet, and is sometimes so happy there, that he almost forgets that he is an inhabitant of this suffering earth.

“ But,” it may be asked, “is not this joy of a very suspicious nature? We admit that some who profess to love the gospel, seem to be peculiarly cheerful and happy, but does not their cheerfulness proceed from a distempered imagination, from heated passions, from delusive fancies? In short, is it not the effect of enthusiasm, rather than of sober piety?” If enthusiasm, my brethren, can make a man holy and happy in a world so sinful and wretched as this, it would be well for us all, if we were this very hour to become decided enthusiasts. But the Christian's joy is not an enthusiastic joy.

2. His song is a *rational*, as well as a heartfelt song. He has really cause for joy. He can give a sober, reasonable account of the sources of his happiness. He can tell us of the pardon of sin, of reconciliation with God, of salvation from hell, of a promise of heaven. If the poor exile is allowed to exult, when he has escaped from captivity; if the condemned criminal is permitted to leap for joy, when he receives the news of a reprieve; why do we require the perishing sinner to stand unmoved, when he hears of redemption and a pardon? It cannot be. Infidelity and ungodliness may require this at a pardoned sinner's hands, but reason calls upon him to sing aloud with joy; to be “zealously affected always” in that good thing which he has chosen as his portion; to “joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom he has received the atonement.” Reason tells him that the religion which gets into a man's affections, and warms his heart, and makes him habitually happy, is the only rational religion, the only religion which is worth contending for or seeking. While she calls upon the atheist and sceptic to indulge gloominess and fear; to look on death with horror and on eternity with dismay; she says to the humble, praying, believing church of Christ, “Ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace; the mountains and the hills shall break forth

before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”

“But of what nature,” it may again be asked, “is this heartfelt, rational joy which the Christian is said to feel? We see those who seem to possess it, abstaining from everything likely to make them happy. They condemn and avoid whatever is cheerful, and appear to welcome everything that is wearisome and gloomy. As for those innocent and rational amusements which constitute the chief pleasures of life, they appear to pour contempt on them, and to regard them with a feeling bordering on disgust.” But here we mistake the Christian’s character. He will never be found to despise any pleasures which are really innocent and rational. He is as much attached to them as other men, and draws from them a much greater degree of delight, than they afford to others. But then he can never think those amusements rational, which are adapted solely to the sensitive part of man, and many of which a brute may enjoy in common with himself. Neither can he deem those pleasures innocent, which directly oppose the precepts of his Bible and his God; which have a tendency to excite affections and lusts that he has been commanded to crucify, and has solemnly promised and vowed to renounce; which are accommodated to the pomps and vanities of this wicked world; which have been applauded by all the foolish and wicked, and condemned by all the wise and pious, in every age of the church; which bring him into the society of the most profane and vicious, and separate him from the company of the most godly and virtuous of mankind; pleasures, from which he himself would tremble to be summoned to the grave and the judgment-seat of a holy God.

3. As for the nature of his happiness, we may observe, further, that the Christian’s song is *a divine* song. The joy which fills his heart, descends from heaven, and comes down from the throne of God. It has its origin in things above the world, and is but little affected by its changes. Poverty cannot silence the song which it pours forth. It can sing the praises of its God as loudly and as sweetly in a prison and at midnight, on a bed of sickness and in the hour of death, as in the day of gladness and the hour of health. It must indeed seem strange in its nature to the mere man of the world, for a “stranger intermeddleth not with it.” He has no capacity for receiving it or comprehending its nature. Even if he were taken to heaven where this joy fills every heart, he would wonder at the happiness around him, deem himself in a strange and stupid place, and wish again for the vanities of the world he had left.

To make this subject plain to us, let us take our Bibles, and read the account which is there given us of heaven. After seriously contemplating the glowing descriptions set before us, let us ask ourselves what ideas of heaven we have obtained. We think it a happy place perhaps, because we read that there will be no sorrow there, no crying, no pain; but this is nearly all we have learned of it. Were we to be asked in what the positive happiness of

heaven consists, we should find a difficulty in answering the question, and perhaps could give no answer whatever to it. Now if the Bible had spoken of riches and honours in heaven, of houses and lands, of sensual amusements and delights, of the song and the dance, of festivity and mirth; in short, if the Bible had exhibited to our view a Mahometan paradise, there would have been something tangible in the description, and we should have been able to form some adequate conception of its happiness. Apply this observation to the subject before us. The Christian seems to be destitute of joy; and why? Not because he is really destitute of it, but because his joy is a divine, and not an earthly or a sensual joy. It is a joy of exactly the same nature, as that which reigns in heaven; and it must therefore be altogether hidden from those who are not heavenly minded.

We cannot be too often reminded that true religion makes a great change in the heart. It takes from it many old desires and affections, and implants in it many new ones. It opens the mind to receive spiritual ideas and spiritual enjoyments. It gives it a new taste. When therefore the truly religious man takes his Bible, and reads the descriptions which the Holy Spirit has there given him of heaven, he sees something real in them, something infinitely desirable. He understands something of the meaning, and tastes something of the sweetness, of “being for ever with the Lord;” of “standing before the throne of God, and worshipping him day and night in his temple;” of “seeing him as he is;” of “awaking up in his likeness, and being satisfied therewith.”

To what conclusion then does this bring us? It brings us to this conclusion, that if we have no joys but those which the world affords us, if we have no taste for spiritual delights, we have no true religion, no connection with Christ, no meetness for heaven. O brethren, it is awful not to find religious things pleasant things. It is awful to find the sabbath a weariness, the worship of God irksome, the sound of the gospel joyless. O let this simple and oft repeated truth reach every ear, and sink deeply into every heart—there is no plainer mark of an unrenewed, unpardoned soul, than the love of the vanities of this present evil world, and an indifference to the great realities of eternity.

III. “But how,” it may be asked, “is this heartfelt, rational, and heavenly joy communicated to the Christian’s soul? Whence does he derive it?” The text answers this enquiry, and reminds us of our third subject of consideration, *the source of the Christian’s joy*.

“Thy statutes,” says David, “have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage.” “I have found thy statutes to be right, rejoicing the heart. The precepts and promises of thy word have been the source of my blessedness, as well as the theme of my song.”

Here however it must be observed, that the holy scriptures have no power in themselves to make the Christian pilgrim happy. Thousands read and hear

them without deriving, or expecting to derive happiness from them. To the Holy Spirit all the joy of the Christian must be traced as its Author, but one of the principal means which he makes use of to communicate this gift, is the word of God.

1. The Bible rejoices the Christian's heart by telling him, first, that, though a pilgrim in a foreign land, *he shall have all his wants supplied*. He finds in this blessed book the sweetest promises of all he can need or wish for in his journey. Wearied and dispirited by its difficulties, he reads here that he is not alone in the world; that his heavenly Father is with him; that his Saviour is bearing a part of his trials, and sharing all his sorrows; that the angels of heaven are commissioned to watch over him, and to keep him in all his ways. With these assurances he is satisfied, yea, he is refreshed and comforted. He goes on his way with joy in his heart, and this song in his mouth; "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 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."

2. The Bible brings joy to a Christian's heart by reminding him of *the end of his pilgrimage, even his home*, and that a peaceful, glorious, and heavenly home.

How sweet is the thought of home to the traveller who has been long absent from it! How does the hope of again beholding it and its beloved inhabitants, support him in his journey, and enable him, though wearied, to travel on with cheerfulness! With such a prospect, the Bible supports and cheers the Christian traveller. He learns from it that heaven is not a fable; that there is something real beyond the grave; that there is a mansion prepared for him, yea, a throne and a crown awaiting him in the realms of eternity, he is told too that he shall soon take a last farewell of this strange land, with all its cares, and sins, and sorrows; that he shall see face to face that Saviour whom his soul loves; press to his heart the fellow-pilgrims whom he has parted with on earth; join the great company of ransomed, purified, and rejoicing saints, and have robes as white as theirs, and palms as green. Who then does not love the Bible, that can read in it of such a home as this, and look forward to it as his own?

3. But the scriptures not only tell the Christian of this heavenly home, they cheer his heart by *pointing out to him the way which leads to it*. The word of God is "a lamp unto his feet, and a light unto his paths." He feels that he is very ignorant and needs a guide, and he finds in the Bible just such a guide as he needs, one that is designed for the ignorant, and able to make wise the simple. He takes it therefore as his map through the wilderness of the world, as his chart across the troubled sea of life.

4. The same scriptures too, that tell the Christian of his home, and point out to him the way which leads to it, *give him the assurance that he shall soon be there*. They remind him of the love, the power, and the faithfulness, of him who has said, “My sheep shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.” They assure him, that if only he will lean on the almighty arm of Christ, he “shall hold on his way,” and grow stronger and stronger as he advances in his course. In the midst of his weakness and fears, they tell him of a multitude of pilgrims who were once travelling the same path in which he is treading, and travelling it too with the same trials and fears, but who are now walking the streets of the new Jerusalem, and rejoicing in its glorious temple. The Bible is not leading him through an untrodden path. It says to him, “Be followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” “Take the prophets who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction and of patience.” “Consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds.”

The subject which we have thus briefly considered, shows us, first, *the reason why so many professors of Christianity are habitually gloomy and comfortless*. They do not love the statutes of the Lord; they do not seek their happiness in them. There is a well of consolation near them, but they turn away from it. They seek happiness in themselves, and forget to seek it in their Bible and their God. The only way to be happy, my brethren, in such a world as this, is to have the Bible often in our hands and still oftener in our hearts; to meditate upon it; to understand what David means when he says, “O how I love thy law! it is my meditation all the day.” “I will meditate in thy precepts, and have respect unto thy ways. I will delight myself in thy statutes; I will not forget thy word.”

The text calls upon us also *highly to value the scriptures*; to esteem them “more precious than gold, yea, than much fine gold, sweeter also than honey and the honey-comb.” If David and Job, who had but a small portion of the word of God, esteemed it more than their necessary food, and took it as their heritage for ever; if these ancient saints so highly valued this precious book and so much rejoiced in it, how ought we to prize it, who have it enriched with the clear, the “exceeding great and precious promises” of the prophets, of the evangelists and apostles, and of Christ himself! Surely we should “bind it about our neck, and write it upon the table of our heart.”

We are reminded also in the text of the *extent to which we should endeavour to circulate the scriptures*. They are designed to bring comfort to the sorrowful, and peace to the wretched. Wherever therefore sorrow and wretchedness are found, there the Bible is wanted, and there it is our duty, if possible, to send it. Wherever a sigh is heaved or a tear shed in the habitation

of misery, there we are called on to send the word of consolation and the gospel of peace.

We may infer, lastly, from the subject on which we have been meditating, that *the spirit which becomes the Christian pilgrim, is a cheerful and rejoicing spirit*. Let the infidel and the ungodly man be gloomy; but let not that man be cheerless, who has the Bible for his comforter, Christ for his Saviour, God for his Father, and heaven for his home. Let him examine the book which contains the charter of his privileges; let him turn over its leaves, and not a word of sorrow can he find addressed to him throughout its sacred pages. Pardon and peace, hope and joy, comfort in death and triumph in eternity—these are the blessings it pours into his bosom, and tells him to call his own. It is true that it reminds him that he is a pilgrim on the earth, and teaches him to cherish within his breast the remembrance of this fact; to let it moderate his desires after earthly things, wean him from the world, and enable him to bear with fortitude its sorrows and trials: but then it tells him also, that “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us;” that though we may “receive the word in much affliction,” we should receive it also “with joy in the Holy Ghost.” The Bible makes spiritual joy our duty, as well as our privilege. It calls upon us to “serve the Lord with gladness, and come before his presence with a song;” to let the world see that we have found that peace of mind in the gospel of Christ, which they cannot find anywhere else; that there is something real in religion, something which can enable a man to spurn the pleasures of time and sense, and rejoice in a crucified Jesus “with joy unspeakable and full of glory.”