SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

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BY

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SERMON XIX.

THE TEARS OF JESUS AT THE GRAVE OF LAZARUS.

St. John xi. 35.

*Jesus wept.*

The history with which these words are con­nected, is familiar to us all. It is the history of the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead. Never perhaps was a more interesting narrative penned. It is crowded with the most affecting incidents; but still the most affecting of them all is that recorded in the text.

In proceeding to enquire into the probable causes of the tears it speaks of, it will perhaps be well to consider our Lord in two points of view —first as the Friend of Lazarus and his sisters, and then as the Redeemer of mankind.

1.*As the Friend of Lazarus and his family,* our Lord certainly wept from *compassion to the mourners whom he saw around him.*

He was never a hard-hearted spectator of human misery. It was compassion for a wretched world, which prevailed on him to leave his hea­venly glories the only time he ever left them, and to take in exchange for them the degradation and miseries of the earth. It was the same principle, that led him to shed tears over the impending miseries of Jerusalem, and to weep on the pre­sent occasion with his sorrowful friends. His tears are expressly ascribed to this source in the thirty-third verse of this chapter. “When Jesus therefore saw Mary weeping and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled.” The original expres­sion signifies, he troubled or afflicted himself; that is, he yielded to the power of that sympathy which was struggling within him for the mastery in his heart, and suffered compassion and sorrow to take possession of his soul.

Observe too, it is said in this verse, that the sorrow of the Jews affected him, as well as the sorrow of Mary; “When Jesus therefore saw her weeping and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned.” Now we have no reason to think that these Jews were either believers in his Messiahship or friends to his person. We may infer therefore, that the compassion of Christ is as extensive as human misery; that while the sorrows of his beloved church touch his heart the most deeply, he has a soul which can feel for the sorrows of his ene­mies, and compassionate the wretchedness even of the most guilty.

What rich encouragement then is here for every afflicted sinner! What a source of con­solation and hope! What though I cannot per­suade myself that I am one of the renewed people of God; yet if my heart is broken with godly sorrow, and I feel a desire to take the burden of my grief to Christ, let not a conscious­ness of guilt hold me back; let not my sinful­ness keep me away from the throne of grace. Only let me go to this compassionate Saviour as a care-worn, helpless, perishing sinner, and I shall be sure to find a welcome, yea, and something more than a welcome, at his throne. He who once wept on earth, has still a heart as tender as ever. He will be sure therefore to give me pity, and may give me pardon and rest.

2. Another cause of the tears of Jesus was *the loss of a friend.*

The brother for whom Mary and Martha were now weeping, was not a stranger to Christ, but one who was peculiarly dear to him, and had been particularly distinguished by him. The evangelist tells us, in the fifth verse of this chapter, that “Jesus loved Lazarus,” and, in the eleventh verse, he describes him as announcing his death to his disciples under the name of a friend; “Our friend Lazarus sleepeth.” Even the word “sleepeth” which he here uses, may show us perhaps the strength of his affection, as well as the greatness of his grief. He does not at once say, “Lazarus is dead;” but, “Our friend Lazarus sleepeth,” as though he knew not how to connect the idea of death with a name so dear to him. The Saviour felt perhaps as we feel, when we are bereaved of a much loved friend. We cannot at first persuade ourselves that the loss is real. As we look on the quiet corpse, we almost expect the eye-lids again to open and the lips to move. And after we have seen our friend buried in the earth, the same strange feeling is still alive. We know that he is dead, but it seems at seasons as though he were only gone on a journey, and would soon return to us to take his usual share in our sorrows and joys. This feeling aggravates rather than ame­liorates our grief, but it shows the strength of our affection for the friend we have lost. As we trace it working in the breast of Jesus, we may not only behold with the Jews how he loved Lazarus, but we may infer that there is a sorrow of the acutest description, which is not forbidden us, when we are bereaved of those we love. We are indeed forbidden in the gospel to sorrow as “they that have no hope;” but we are nowhere commanded to root out of our hearts that feeling and tenderness which, for the wisest of purposes, our merciful Creator has implanted within us. Insensibility forms no part of Chris­tianity. The religion of Christ has nothing to do with hardness of heart. It exalts us to the dignity of children of God, but it does not de­stroy in us those natural affections which are com­mon to the children of men. While it modifies and governs, it strengthens them, and bends them to its own gracious purposes.

Hence the liveliest feelings of sorrow are not inconsistent with the Christian character. Abraham was an eminent servant of God and full of faith in his promises, and yet when his beloved wife died in Kirjath-arba, “Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her.” They were devout men who carried Stephen to his burial, and yet “they made great lamentation over him.” A want of feeling under affliction, a despising of it, is as much to be guarded against as fainting or despair. “My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord,” is as much the language of God, as the command not to faint when we are rebuked of him. To be stricken and yet not to grieve, is to expose ourselves to the displeasure of the Almighty and to the sharpest arrows of his quiver.

While our grief therefore is mingled with re­signation, and a child-like submission to the will of that heavenly Father who has smitten us; while it is not suffered to impair our spiritual comforts, our hopes and graces; let the heart mourn, let the tear flow. The man of the world may condemn us as childish and weak, and here and there an inexperienced professor of religion may suspect the sincerity of our faith; but the Lord Jesus Christ will neither condemn nor sus­pect us. He will remember his own tears, and will not be offended by ours.

3. The tears of Christ might be occasioned, thirdly, by *the instance before him of the insta­bility of human happiness.*

The habitation he now found a house of mourning, he had often found a house of peace. He had seen it the abode of as happy a family as ever the sun arose on. Formerly Mary used to sit at his feet, listening with the most profound attention to every word that he uttered, and treasuring up his sayings with gratitude and reverence in her heart; now she lies prostrate before him, bathed in tears, unable even to wel­come him to her sorrowful home, and only able to say, “Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.”

Thus short-lived and precarious is the earthly happiness of man. The scene before us is an everyday scene. It is only a picture of what is happening continually in the habitations around us, and may soon happen in our own. Our family may be as united as the family of Mary, and her sister, and Lazarus, once was; we may,like them, honour the blessed Jesus, and Jesus may love us and take up his abode with us; but mutual love, and heartfelt piety, though they may heighten the joys of our household and alle­viate its sorrows, will not keep sickness and death away from us. Our children are still sub­ject to the stroke of death, and are as liable as others to become orphans and fatherless. We may still be called on to follow our brothers to the grave, or they may soon have to shed their unavailing tears over us. The wife of our bosom may be as pious as Ruth or as Hannah, but her piety will not exempt her from that mortality which is the common lot of man, nor will her love for her husband cause him to live for ever.

It is a difficult lesson to learn, brethren, but it is one which can never be learned too soon, that all our earthly comforts are merely lent to us for a season, and that an uncertain season; that we may be required to part with them long before we have ceased to love them; that the prop may be knocked from under us, at the very moment when it seems the strongest, and we most need it to bear our weight. Thus it ever has been, and it is for our good that thus it ever should be. We are ready to make idols of our blessings, even though we are aware of their frailty; but we should cleave to them still more sinfully, if we knew that they were never to be removed. Our duty then is plain. We must cease to make flesh our arm. Let us love our children and our friends, but let us not lean on them; let us not deem them essential to our hap­piness. God can make the Christian happy with­out the help of any of his creatures, and he must not deem himself a Christian, who is not satisfied with his God; who is not content to lay his head on his heavenly Father’s bosom and say, “This is my rest for ever. Here is the source of my blessedness, and the spring of my joy. What, though I be left childless and friendless on the earth? My Saviour is not dead; my Father has not ceased to be with me. What though all the streams be dried up? The fountain of living waters is full, and as long as this fountain is open to me, I can be happy. I can drink of it, and forget my poverty and remember my misery no more.”

Here also is a lesson for those in whose families God is not feared or loved. And it is mournful to think how many such families there are in this Christian land. The great mass of us are conscious that the name of the Being who made us, is not honoured in our habitations. We do not call upon our households to worship him in the morning, nor to praise him in the evening. But this conduct is as much opposed to our own interest, as it is cruel to our families and ungrate­ful to our God; for what shall we do, brethren, when trouble, disease, or death, comes into our habitations, and strips us of everything we love? What shall we do, when we look around us for consolation, and, like Noah’s dove, find no resting place even for the sole of our foot? It is an easy thing to laugh at the Bible and despise the gospel in the hour of health and ease; but health and ease will not last for ever. An hour of tri­bulation may come; an hour in which we would give the world to have the faith and hope of the Christian; to have that ark to flee to, which shelters him so peacefully amidst the storms of life; to have but that simple belief in the Bible, that simple dependence on God, which we now make light of and perhaps turn into a jest. O if there is a foolish being in the universe, it is the man who finds himself living in a world so full of trouble as this, and yet despises the only thing which can support and comfort him under its sorrows!

II. Let us now proceed a step farther, and view the tears of our Lord, not merely as those of a tender-hearted and benevolent man, but as the tears of *the great Redeemer of the world.*

His sorrow undoubtedly arose in part, and perhaps principally, from those feelings which he possessed in common with his brethren; but we must not forget that he was the Son of God, as well as the Son of man, and must conse­quently have had thoughts arise in his mind, as he looked on the grave of the departed Lazarus, into which no merely human mourner can enter.

1. Of many of these sources of sorrow, we are unable to form the faintest conception; but we may reasonably suppose that his tears were drawn from him partly by *the view afforded him of the degradation of human nature.*

He was now standing near a grave, and with a mind such as his, he could not forget the original condition of the creature who was there turning to rottenness and dust. His thoughts must have gone farther back than the house of Mary. He must have contrasted the scene now before him with that which he once beheld in the garden of Eden, the earthly paradise of God. He remem­bered what man once was; he thought of what he might still have been; and as he looked on the tomb of Lazarus, he wept.

And who, brethren, can seriously think of the grave, and not see it to be, in this point of view, a most mournful spectacle? It was not originally “the house appointed for all living.” God did not design it as the end of all men. We chose it for ourselves. It was our own hand which im­planted the seeds of death in our frames, and made them the heirs of a loathsome corruption.

When also we look on the two worlds between which the grave is situated, and view them as the habitations of our fallen race, our painful searchings of heart are not diminished. It is not a flowery path which leads us to the tomb, neither is the country beyond it always found to be a land of rest. We pass through many a scene of sorrow to this dreary home, and, in many instances, we find it to be only the way into a world of greater suffering and still keener an­guish. Who can contemplate the millions of mankind thus going century after century to the grave and thus issuing out of it, and not drop a compassionate tear over the awful degradation of our state? Man indeed is guilty. No load of misery will ever outweigh his offences. But then the guilty may be pitied, and our compassion may be extended even to the sinful.

It must be remembered also that our degraded state was more likely to affect Christ, than it is us. None can behold a stately building beaten down by violence, without being moved; but it is the architect, the man whose skill and industry raised the fabric, who weeps the most bitterly over its ruins. Now man was the workmanship of Christ. He built him at first a pure and holy temple for the residence of Jehovah. How then must his soul have been grieved when he beheld the work of his hands laid waste! when he saw the building he had raised, forsaken by its great Inhabitant and made a desolation, retaining indeed amidst its ruins some faint traces of its original glory, but only enough to show the greatness of its degradation!

2. Christ might have been led to weep at the tomb of Lazarus by *the unbelief and obstinacy of many who surrounded him.*

He had already performed many miracles and done many mighty works, in order to convince the Jews that he was indeed their long promised Messiah, but they still called him the carpenter’s son, and refused to receive him as the Son of the Highest. But he did not abandon them. He was now about to perform in their sight a miracle of a still more extraordinary nature than any they had witnessed before; one which seemed calculated to overcome the most deeply rooted prejudices, and to remove the most stubborn infidelity. He foresaw however that even this exertion of his power would be lost on the greater part of the multitude around him; that while some of them would be led to believe on him, others would only have their hatred against him increased, and be more earnest to effect his destruction. Hence perhaps he was troubled in spirit, and wept.

It might indeed have been supposed that even the compassionate Jesus could not have wept over such obstinate sinners as these; that he would have left them to the misery they chose, with emotions of indignation rather than of sorrow; but he tenderly loved the Jews. He remembered that they were the children of Abra­ham, his ancient friend; and he could not see them madly rushing on to destruction, without shedding over them the tear of pity. Though they were his enemies and were thirsting for his blood, he could not willingly abandon the house of Israel to the miseries prepared for them; but, like a merciful judge, he wept over the obdurate crimi­nals whom justice required him to give up to vengeance. Indeed one of the chief and most constant sources of the Redeemer’s sorrow while he dwelt on the earth, was the ingratitude which he received from the sinners whom he was endur­ing so much to save. “He came unto his own, and his own received him not;” and when he went to others, he experienced the same treat­ment. They poured contempt on him, and would not take him for their Saviour and their Lord. “He was despised and rejected of men;” and it was this which made him so much “a man of sor­rows,” and so deeply “acquainted with grief.”

We know not how much our own unbelief con­tributed to fill up that cup of sorrow, of which he drank. He foresaw how many of us would make light of him, and of all that he was about to do and suffer for our sakes; how contemptu­ously we should treat his gospel, and how cruelly we should throw away our souls. Who can tell but that even when weeping at Bethany, he thought of some careless sinner now in this house of prayer? some poor trifler who is now hearing with unconcern of his love and tears? some hard-hearted transgressor who, rather than part with his follies and sins, will consent to lose heaven and his soul? Who can tell but that some of us might have caused the blessed Jesus to heave an additional sigh in this sorrowful hour, and have given to his troubled breast an additional pang?

How is it then, brethren, that we ourselves are so little affected by that which affected Jesus so much? How is it that while he wept over our contempt of his gospel, we can so often be warned of it, and yet never be moved; we who are so deeply concerned in it, and on whose heads it is bringing down so much misery? The reason is plain. We know not the value of salvation. We know not the worth of our souls. Sin and the world hold undivided possession of our hearts, and we have not a serious thought to spare for eternity.

These then were some of the probable causes of the tears which the Redeemer shed at the grave of Lazarus. As a man, he wept over the sorrows of his brethren, at the loss of a friend, and from a contemplation of the instability of all human happiness. He wept as the Redeemer of men over the degradation of mankind, and the guilt and wretchedness of impenitent sinners.

The first and most obvious inference we may draw from his tears is this—*Tenderness of heart is not inconsistent with greatness of mind.* We see both these graces exemplified in the highest degree in the history before us, and throughout the whole course of the Redeemer’s life.

And yet many of the followers of Jesus have represented the lively emotions of sympathy as a weakness which, as Christians and men, we ought not to encourage. It is true that these emotions ought to be modified and duly regu­lated; but as for suppressing the warm feelings of friendship, the workings of compassion, or the tears of pity, the religion of Christ requires not this at our hands. On the contrary, it calls upon us to cherish these affections; to send every caviller against them to Bethany and Calvary, and bid him look on the Being who is weeping and dying there.

*How lovely a character is the character of Jesus Christ!*

Nothing more endears to us a man of exalted rank, than to see him entering into the sorrows of the poor and the mean; but here is one weep­ing with the sorrowful, who is higher than the highest angel, and in comparison with whom the greatest of the sons of men is but as a worm or a moth.

How is it then, brethren, that many of us think so meanly of this Jesus? The great reason is this—we love sin, and we therefore hate everything which is opposed to it. If Christ did not wound our pride and condemn our practices; if he sanctioned our opinions, our follies, and vices, in this world, and promised us something like a Mahometan Paradise in the next, all would be well; we should admire his character, and instead of pouring contempt on his gospel, his ministers, and his servants, we should uphold and applaud them all.

We may infer, lastly, from the text, that *they who are the friends of the compassionate Saviour, may find in the tenderness of his heart a never failing source of encouragement and consolation.*

Where is that Jesus now, who once wept with Mary and Martha at the grave of their brother? “He is exalted to the right hand of the Majesty on high.” How is he there employed? “He ever liveth to make intercession for us.” But does he remember the feelings and workings of his mind when on earth? Does Bethany still live in his memory? It does, and all the sorrow and anguish he experienced there. The Bible tells us that he still retains the same human nature that he had then, and is touched as deeply with our infirmities, and can enter as experiment­ally into our sorrows.

This thought is an encouraging and blessed one, brethren, and cannot hold too high a place in our minds. The more it is cherished within us, the more shall we enjoy of the blessedness of religion; the more peaceful shall we be in tribu­lation, and the more thankful in prosperity. It will make our heavenly Friend still dearer to our hearts, increase our longings after the heaven in which he dwells, and give a new and unspeakable sweetness to our communion with God.