SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

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BY

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SERMON II.

THE WORSHIP AND PRIVILEGES OF THE HEAVENLY TEMPLE.

Revelation vii. 15, 16, 17.

*Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he that sitteth on the throne, shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne, shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.*

In the preceding verse of this chapter, the be­loved disciple gives us a short account of the former condition of those, whose blessedness he here describes. He tells us that they were not always in that happy and honoured state in which he saw them; that they were once inhabitants of a ruined world, and had their full share of its cares, its sorrows, and its sins. He tells us also of the means by which the great change that has passed on them, was effected, and ascribes it solely to one cause, the blood of Christ. He then goes on to inform us what the merit of this blood has done for them; it has washed them from their sins, lifted them out of their great tribulation, and carried them in triumph to the city of their God. Neither is this all. It has not only opened for them the everlasting doors of the new Jerusalem, but placed them in the very palace of its king, made them priests in the hea­venly temple, and the most honoured and blessed among them who worship there. They are “be­fore the throne of God;” they “serve him day and night in his temple and “he that sitteth on the throne,” dwells among them, and wipes away “all tears from their eyes.”

It is plain from the words before us, that heaven, though a place of rest, is not a scene of inactivity. It is a temple, in the services of which all the redeemed saints are constantly and diligently employed. What then is the nature of its services? and what are the privileges of those who are employed therein? An angel from heaven, brethren, could not fully answer these questions in the language of mortals; and if he could, we should not understand him. Before we can form any adequate ideas of the employ­ments and joys of this heavenly temple, we must enter its doors and worship in its courts. We may however see something of its glories in the glow­ing description before us. It leads us to consider, first, the worship of the glorified saints, and, se­condly, their privileges.

I. What then is the nature of *that worship which is offered to the Lord in his holy temple in heaven?*

We may obtain an imperfect answer to this enquiry, by contrasting the services of its priests, with the polluted offerings of the servants of God below. This view of the subject is, it is true, humiliating, but not humiliating only; it is, at the same time, calculated to encourage and to cheer our hearts.

It must however be previously observed, that the worship in this heavenly temple, is not ma­terially different in its nature from the worship of our earthly temples. The saints in glory may, it is true, have faculties and powers com­municated to them, of which we have not, in our present state, the slightest idea, and they may employ these powers in acts of worship, with which we are altogether unacquainted; but as far as our limited understandings enable us to comprehend the descriptions given us of their services, we can see nothing in them of a nature essentially different from our own. Some parts of our present worship may indeed be alto­gether laid aside or greatly altered in a holier world. We shall not have any new sins to mourn over in heaven, and the workings of repentance may consequently never be experienced there, and the voice of confession be silenced. The soul will undoubtedly be still mindful of its for­mer state of iniquity and vileness, but the re­membrance will have no power to disturb its serenity, and serve only to give an additional sweetness to the purity with which it will be clothed, and fresh energy to the gratitude which its blessedness will excite.

Prayer too seems to be principally designed for our present state of infirmity and want. It is true that we shall be dependent creatures even in heaven, and as much indebted to the divine good­ness for the blessings of every moment, as we are on earth; but then we know that even here the rich bounty of God can anticipate our wants; and he can surely fill the hearts of his servants with happiness hereafter, without keeping them con­tinually as suppliants at his footstool. Prayer is not the only means which he can employ to keep us mindful of our dependence and meanness. We shall stand before the throne, and the majesty and greatness of him that sitteth thereon, will force us to see that no flesh can glory in his presence, and that the station which becomes the highest of his creatures, is the dust.

But though the worship of the saints is pro­bably the same in its nature in heaven, as it is on earth, yet there is a great difference in the manner in which this worship is offered up in these two worlds—a difference so great, that the liveliest earthly worshipper bears but a faint re­semblance to the meanest heavenly one. The same dispositions are in both places brought into exercise, but then these dispositions are freed in the one from all those counteracting feelings which are constantly felt in the other. They are enlivened, and refined, and raised to a fulness of vigour and of joy.

1. In contrasting the worship of these two worlds, we may observe, first, that the worship of heaven is *uninterrupted,* constant. “They serve him day and night in his temple.”

We are incapable of this continual worship in our present state. Our feeble bodies require us to give several hours of every night to sleep, and it is only a small part of the day, that the necessary concerns of life will allow us to set apart to God. Even the little time which we are enabled to de­vote to private, family, and public worship, is not all spent in the work in which we appear to be engaged. The cares of the world follow us into our closets and our churches, and tie down to the earth the heart which should rise to meet its Lord. When too the soul does disengage itself from its bonds, it is but for a season. If it soars to its native heavens one hour, it sinks down into the dust the next. Its spirits are soon exhausted, and its powers fatigued and weakened.

It is not thus however in the heavenly temple. They who worship there, never need repose. There is no weariness to put a stop to their ser­vice, nor any cares and anxieties to distract and pollute it. If we, brethren, are ever suffered to join that glorious assembly, all beyond the grave will be one never ending sabbath, and we shall always be in a sabbath-spirit. After millions of ages spent in the delightful service, instead of tiring or fainting, the soul will be hourly acquiring an increase of strength. The very work in which it is engaged, will enlarge and exalt its faculties, and add vigour to its energies.

2. The worship of the heavenly world is also *pure.* All who are engaged in.it, are holy wor­shippers. Into whatever assembly the Christian goes here, he must offer up his prayers and praises in company with some who love not his Saviour and who fear not his God; but there the assembly is composed of those only who are spiritual and holy. Their number is im­mense; they form a great multitude; but not one formalist, not one self-deceiver, not one hypocrite, can be found amongst them. And not only are all the worshippers pure, their worship itself is free from all mixture of imperfection and sin. There is no blemish either in the priest or in the sacrifice, but all is “holiness to the Lord.”

3. Their worship too is *fervent.*

If we know anything of real religion, we know that our affections are not always in active exer­cise when we are engaged in the work of prayer or praise. Our hearts are often cold and dead. We strive to raise them up to something like de­votion, but they seem at seasons as though they had lost all feeling, and were become insensible as stones. This deadness must be ascribed partly to the weakness of our nature, and partly to its sin­fulness. The Christian mourns over it, and prays and strives against it, but his efforts will not be always successful. After all his exertions, his heart will sometimes be lifeless and his devotions languid. It is not so in heaven. They who sing of salvation there, sing of it “with a loud voice;” with an exulting and overflowing heart. No coldness of feeling, no deadness of love, distresses their souls. All is fervour and zeal, spirit and life.

4. Hence the worship they offer is a *delightful* worship.

The services of our earthly houses of prayer are in some degree delightful. The Christian finds them to be so. He feels it to be “good for him to draw near to God” in them, and is often refreshed, and comforted, and made joyful in his house of prayer. His Sunday is his day of joy as well as of rest. He loves it, and looks for­ward to it through the other days of the week with expectation and delight. In the midst of those cares and vexations which the concerns of the world occasion, he often says, “The sabbath will soon be here; then shall I go up to the house of my God, and find a refuge from my anxieties and sorrows. My Saviour will meet me in his sanctuary, and I shall forget my poverty, and remember my misery no more. I shall hear of his tenderness and love, and my sorrowful spirit shall be comforted. I shall hear of his bitter agonies and death, and even my cold heart shall burn, and my unclean soul shall hope for salvation.” But these expectations of the Chris­tian are not always gratified. The troubles and anxieties of the week too often follow him on the day of rest, and he eats his spiritual bread with tears, and sends up his languid prayers without enjoyment or delight. One sabbath his heart glows with a heavenly joy as he listens to the sound of the gospel; the next, all seems changed. Ministers appear to have lost their energy, the name of Christ seems robbed of its sweetness, and the gospel no longer retains its savour and its charms. But when once we have entered the courts of the heavenly Jerusalem, and joined the assembly of the saints who worship there, these seasons of mourning will be for ever at an end. All the difficulties of our service will have passed away, and every act of worship will be delightful to the spirit, and bring with it “a joy unspeak­able and full of glory.”

5. The service of heaven is, further, a *united* service. We are told, in the ninth verse of this chapter, that the multitude which fills the hea­venly temple, was taken from “all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues and yet these glorified priests form here but one body. They worship in the same temple, and they are all en­gaged in the same work; the same spirit lives in every soul, and the same song is heard from every mouth. All jarring contentions and frivo­lous distinctions have ceased, mutual prejudices have been forgotten, and sects and parties have been done away.

Do we, brethren, hope to join this peaceful company in heaven? Let us first learn to be of one mind here on earth. O what a lamentable difference is there, in this respect, between us and these inhabitants of the heavenly world! What discordant sentiments and feelings reign among us! What jealousies and bitter strifes interrupt our harmony! As for divisions, some of us have ceased to regard them as evils, and a spirit of schism and ambition begins to be looked on as a virtue, rather than as a sin. Brethren, “these things ought not so to be.” They are sad “spots in our feasts of charity.” They savour not of heaven. They are fruits of a tree which has never flourished there. Before we can ever enter yonder world of union and peace, the wis­dom which is from above, must have taught us to root out pride and malice from our hearts, and bitterness and evil speaking must no longer be suffered to defile our lips. We cannot perhaps be all of the same opinion, but let us at least be of the same spirit; and let that be “a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price;” let it be the spirit of our Master, who was “meek and lowly in heart;” who, “when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suf­fered, he threatened not, but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.”

6. The worship of heaven is also *humble.* In the midst of all their glory, the redeemed saints appear in the heavenly temple in the character of creatures and of sinners. We see no presump­tion or pride in their worship, no unholy fami­liarity. The dignity to which they are raised, has not made them unmindful of the greatness of Jehovah, nor of that state of meanness and sin, from which he has rescued them. “They fall down before the throne” when they worship him that sitteth on it, and “cast down their crowns before him.”

The very song which they sing, proves their great humility, and the lively sense which they still entertain of their former sinful condition. They were once employed in working out their salvation with fear and trembling; but the work has now been done, and a glorious salvation has been obtained. Surely then if ever there was room for boasting, it is now. The battle has been fought; the victory has been won; and the warriors in the conflict may surely take some part of the glory. But no; these triumphant conquerors give all the glory to another. We hear nothing from them of their own patience and labours, their own sufferings and martyr­doms. These are all forgotten, and nothing seems to live in their remembrance, but their former mi­sery and guilt, and the grace and mercy of their God. They cry with a loud voice, saying, “Sal­vation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.”

The worship then which is offered in the tem­ple of God above, is uninterrupted, pure, fervent, delightful, united, and humble.

II. Let us proceed to consider *the privileges which these heavenly worshippers enjoy.*

1. We may notice, first, *the dignity of their station in this temple.* They are “before the throne of God.”

We may see something of the greatness of this honour by looking back to the Jewish taber­nacle, the temple of the Lord in the wilderness. The Israelites in general were not allowed to come near this sanctuary; and though the Levites were permitted to pitch their tents around it, it was only the consecrated priests among them, who dared to enter within it to minister before the Lord. Even these were not permitted to go into every part of the tabernacle. They might go to the altar of burnt-offering, but the holy place where the mercy-seat was, could be entered by the high priest only, and that, not when he pleased, but at a stated period once in the year. Now all this was done to impress on the minds of the Jews a deep sense of the divine purity and greatness; but it may serve also to show us the dignity of that station to which redeemed sinners are advanced in the king­dom of Christ. It would have been a miracle of mercy if they had been admitted into the outer courts of this house, where they might have be­held the worship of the angels, and listened to their songs; but to be admitted into the temple itself, to be placed on an equality with the an­gelic worshippers there, to share in their services, and to be brought close to the throne of Jehovah in the holy of holies—surely this is a love “which passeth knowledge.” The angels themselves can­not comprehend it. All that we can do is to won­der and adore.

But let us take a somewhat closer view of the dignified station to which these priests are raised. To be before the throne of God implies that *they are admitted to the enjoyment of close communion with him;* that they are brought into his imme­diate presence, and have an intimate, enlarged, and continual intercourse with him; that they talk with Jehovah as a man talks with his friend.

Here we worship an unseen God. We could not bear the glory of the divine presence in this earthly state. Even the work of his hands, the sun which he has stationed in the heavens, re­flects more of his splendour than our feeble eyes can bear. But if ever we reach the heavenly courts, we shall see him whom we worship; and have faculties communicated to us, which will enable us to bear and enjoy the sight. The scriptures plainly intimate to us also, how the Almighty will reveal himself to our eyes. The glorified body of the once crucified Jesus will be the Shechinah in his temple, through which the full brightness of Jehovah will for ever shine forth. Hence we are told that the city in which this temple stands, has “no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it, for the glory of God doth lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.”

To stand before the throne of God implies also *a participation of his glory and happiness,* an entering into his blessedness. “In his presence there is a fulness of joy,” and all who are admit­ted into his temple, partake of this fulness, and taste of those pleasures which are at his right hand. We cannot describe these pleasures and this joy. All that we know of them is, that they comprehend the happiness of God himself, a shar­ing in his glory, a partaking of his bliss. We shall enter into that joy, the very prospect of which made the Son of his love willingly endure the cross, and despise the shame. “Beloved,” says Saint John, “now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that when he shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

2. The text tells us also of the *rich* *provision which is made for all the wants of the heavenly worshippers.* As the priests in the Jewish tem­ple not only dwelt in the house of the Lord, but partook of the sacrifices which were offered therein, so the priests in Jehovah's temple above find in it all the spiritual provision that their souls can desire.

Has want then ever found its way into this kingdom of happiness? Can its glorified inha­bitants need any provision? The inhabitants of heaven are, in one sense, just as needy as any of the dwellers upon earth. The highest angel that treads its courts, is as dependent upon the Al­mighty, as the feeblest insect. In this respect, all the creatures in the universe are on an equality. They who are before the throne of God, are in­deed said “to hunger no more, neither thirst any more;” but then it is plain from the following verse, that they have many desires which require to be gratified; else why does the Lamb feed them, and lead them unto living fountains of waters? They are strangers to that hunger which arises from want, and implies some painful sensation; but they are not strangers to that hun­gering and thirsting after God, which arises from love to him, and includes in it the most earnest desire for the enjoyments of his presence. Their happiness consists in having all their spiritual desires kept in unceasing exercise, and in having them fully gratified. They still thirst after the water of life, and it is supplied to them largely from those rivers of pleasure, which flow around the throne of Jehovah. They still hunger after spiritual food, and their table is spread with pro­visions gathered from “the tree of life, which stands in the midst of the paradise of God.”

The happiness which results from this provision made for their souls, is *uninterrupted and unmixed.* Nothing can enter their habitation to disturb or mar it. “Neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat.” “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.” They shall have an eternity of joy without one moment’s sorrow, an immortality of bliss without one moment’s pain.

Their happiness too is *everlasting.* They are not supplied out of a cistern which may be broken or exhausted, but from a fountain which can never fail. “The Lamb which is in the midst of the throne, shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters.” All our enjoyments here are precarious; even our spiritual delights are often transitory; but let our souls once ascend into the heavenly kingdom, and we shall be far beyond the reach of precariousness and change. The temple which we shall inhabit, defies the hand of time to destroy or touch it. No earthquake can shake it, no fire consume it, no tempest beat it down. It is an everlast­ing habitation, “a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” The rest too into which we shall enter, will be “quietness and assurance for ever.” The joy which will be upon our heads, will be everlasting joy. Millions of years will roll away, but we shall be still resting from our labours, we shall be still growing in blessedness and glory. “Thy sun shall no more go down,” saith the Lord, “neither shall thy moon withdraw itself, for the Lord shall be thine everlasting light; and the days of thy mourning shall be ended.”

Observe too that the hand from which these heavenly worshippers receive this rich provision, this uninterrupted, full and never ending happi­ness, is the same hand that snatched them from destruction, and gave them all the mercies they received on earth. It is the Lamb, who feeds them; it is the Lamb, who leads them unto “living fountains of waters.” Though seated on the throne of the universe, Jesus still sustains the character of their Saviour. He appears in his glorious temple as “the Lamb that was slain,” and delights to minister there to his ran­somed church. He once shared in their sorrows, and, to comfort and cheer them, he fed them “in green pastures,” and made them to lie down “beside the still waters;” he now shares in their joys, and feeds them in far richer pastures than they ever saw below; he leads them, not to the streams, but to the living fountains, of consolation and bliss.

There is no happiness either in heaven or earth, in time or eternity, which does not proceed from the once crucified Jesus. He is as much the spring of all the glory of heaven, as of the pardon and grace bestowed on sinners upon earth. It is this reflection, which so much heightens all the joys of eternity, and makes the thought of them so sweet to the Christian’s soul—he will receive them from Christ; they will come to him from the hand of his beloved Lord.

From this brief consideration of the worship and privileges of the heavenly temple, we may deduce a few practical inferences.

There is one reflection which must immediately force itself on our notice—*No man can be happy in heaven, who has not first learned to delight in the worship of God.* The text plainly tells us that the happiness of eternity consists in this worship, and in the spiritual privileges connected with it. If then we have no taste for these things, if the service of God be wearisome to us and the blessedness resulting from it without power to delight us, from what unknown source do we expect to derive that fulness of joy which we hope for in heaven? Of what river of plea­sure do we expect to drink? There are no sen­sual delights to be found within its courts. The heaven of the Bible is not a Mahometan paradise. It is a Christian temple; and all the joys it has to communicate, must be found in its pure and spi­ritual services. It has no other blessedness to boast of, no other pleasures to bestow. We must either find happiness in these things, or, in the midst of rejoicing angels and saints, we shall be wretched, and sigh again for the enjoyments of the earth we have left.

How then do we at present stand affected to­wards this temple and its services? Could we find happiness in them? Does the prospect of them enkindle our desires? If we were this very moment to be removed from this earthly house of God to his temple above, should we be satisfied there? Alas, brethren, how many of us would find its heavenly courts just as irksome and weari­some, as we now find this house of prayer! We should be as dissatisfied with the one, as we are with the other. We should have no other song in heaven than this, “What a weariness is it! When will this sabbath be gone?” Death will make no material, no radical alteration in our tastes and desires. What we love in time, we shall love in eternity. What is hateful to us now, will be hateful to us then. We must have a relish for the happiness of angels now, or we shall be utterly incapable of enjoying it hereafter. Heaven must be begun in our worship below, if we expect to partake of its blessedness above.

And here we are brought to the same conclu­sion that every religious subject will bring us to, if we seriously consider it—some great change must take place within us before we can be happy with God; a change, not of sentiments and opi­nions merely, but a great moral change, a change of dispositions and affections. We must be born “again of the Spirit;” we must be “renewed in the spirit of our minds.”

We may infer, secondly, from the employments and privileges of the priests in the heavenly temple, *the great importance and blessedness of the worship of God here on earth.* This worship is not merely a duty which the Christian is com­manded to perform; it is a privilege which it is permitted him to enjoy. The work of praise is the work of heaven; it is therefore an honour­able and blessed work; a work, which can make the meanest of the sons of men resemble, in some degree, the angels of God, and give him a fore­taste of their joys. That life is the happiest, which is the most devoted to this employment. That man is the holiest and the nearest to heaven, who has the greatest love for it.

If then we would pass through the world in holiness and peace, and go, when we leave it, to a kingdom of glory, we must begin the work of heaven here on earth, and become the spiritual worshippers and ministering priests of the living God. The everlasting priesthood of all the re­deemed saints who are now before the throne, was begun here. Here their robes were washed; here their hearts were cleansed; here they were anointed by the Spirit of grace, and consecrated, and set apart for God; here they began the wor­ship and the song which are now employing them; and here they first tasted of the joy which now fills their hearts. Here too, if ever we would join their society, our own priesthood and wor­ship must begin; *nay,* if we are really Christians, here they have already begun. We are already come to “the heavenly Jerusalem, to the innu­merable company of angels, and to the general assembly and church of the first-born.” We have already shared in the work of the New Jerusalem, and had a foretaste of its happiness.

May the prospect which has been vouchsafed to us of the worship and blessedness of its temple, animate us in the work we have begun, and lead us to aspire after a greater resemblance to its rejoicing inhabitants! May it stir us up to make their chief employment our own! Praise is the great work which employs the saints in heaven, and ought to be the great work of the saints on earth. Our wants constrain us to pray, and it is our interest and duty to pray without ceasing, but praise is as much the duty of a priest, as sacrifice or prayer. We have as much to praise God for, as we have to pray to him for. Our mercies are, if possible, more numerous than our wants. Our duty then is plain. It is the same that Saint Paul has marked out for us; “In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.”

The last reflection suggested to us by the text is this—*How desirable is death to the spiritual and heavenly-minded worshipper of God!* The temple we have been contemplating, with all its holy services and glorious privileges, is very near us. Distant as that world may seem, on which its foundations stand, the hand of death can in a moment place us in its courts, and surround us with its splendours.

Who then that loves the worship of the Lord, does not wish to die, that he may go and appear in this house before his God? Our souls long for the enjoyment of his presence even in his earthly temples; early have we sought him there, and desired above all things “to see his power and his glory, as his saints have seen them in his sanctuary.” Shall we then be unwilling to leave this world of tribulation and of sin, that we may stand “before the throne of God,” “serve him day and night in his temple,” and have God continually dwelling among us, and the Lamb feeding us? Have we no desire to exchange the imperfect and polluted worship of earth, for the pure services and glorious privileges of heaven? Have we no wish to be where Abraham and Paul are worshipping, where David is singing? Have we no longings after the society of the friends we loved on earth, and who are waiting for us to join their songs in heaven? “We took sweet counsel” with them here below, and our united worship often made our hearts burn within us; but we shall derive far greater joy from mingling our praises with theirs in the land above. No coldness will be there to disturb our friendship, nor any cares, or anxieties, or separations, to in­terrupt it. We shall have no wanderings to mourn over in our united prayers, no deadness of spirit in our praises. The meanest redeemed sin­ner that enters the temple which has received their souls, will sing a louder and a sweeter song, than the brightest archangel there. The angels have never tasted of pardoning grace and redeem­ing love. They may say, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,” but they cannot say, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain for us.” They cannot sing this song of the redeemed; “Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever.”