

SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

BY

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TO THE
REV. GABRIEL VALPY, A.M.

THIS VOLUME IS INSCRIBED,
AS A TOKEN OF THE ESTEEM AND AFFECTION
OF HIS GREATLY OBLIGED FRIEND,
THE AUTHOR.

High Wycombe, May 20, 1820.

SERMON III.

THE GROUNDS OF DAVID'S FORBEARANCE TOWARDS SHIMEI.

2 SAMUEL xvi. 11, 12.

And David said to Abishai and to all his servants, Behold, my son, which came forth of my bowels, seeketh my life; how much more now may this Benjamite do it! Let him alone, and let him curse, for the Lord hath bidden him. It may be that the Lord will look on mine affliction, and that the Lord will requite me good for his cursing this day.

WE are all disposed, in a greater or less degree, to trace effects to their causes. As soon as we begin to think, we begin to make enquiries concerning the operations of nature, and to examine the productions of human skill. But amidst the many objects which engage our attention, it is strange that the workings of our own minds should so little occupy our thoughts. Next to the contemplation of the glorious Jehovah, there cannot be a more profitable subject of investigation, than the human heart; and he may undoubtedly be considered the wisest among men, and will generally be found to be the best, who is the most acquainted with its varied movements. God himself has commanded us to commune with our own hearts; and to excite and encourage us to look into ourselves, he often lays open to our view in the scriptures the hearts of others. He unfolds the hidden causes from which their actions have proceeded, and thus discovers to us the principles and feelings which must be cherished in our own breasts, if we would imitate their virtues.

The words of the text afford us an instance of this method of instruction. They exhibit to us one of the noblest triumphs over the corruptions of his nature, that almighty grace ever enabled a feeble sinner to obtain; and while we are admiring and almost envying the conquering servant of God, they show us the weapons by which the victory was won. David, in his adversity, receives from Shimei an undeserved, a cruel, and most irritating provocation; he reviles him, and curses him, and casts stones at him; but the afflicted monarch bears all his insults with silent meekness; he forgives and protects his railing enemy; and here in the text he discloses to his wondering attendants the feelings which actuated his conduct towards him.

His words evidently direct our attention to *the grounds of his forbearance towards Shimei*; and they convince us at once, that this forbearance did not proceed from a want of feeling, or from a natural hardness of heart. Some men seem to bear provocations, as a stone may be said to bear them. They excite no resentment, for they are not felt. But this insensibility is not Christian meekness. We must feel before we can forgive; and that forgiveness is

the most exalted in its nature, which is accompanied with the keenest sense of the injuries it pardons. Neither was this insensibility the meekness of David. His was one of the warmest hearts that ever beat in a human breast. Every act of kindness had power to move it, and he himself tells us that reproach could almost break it.

1. His forbearance must be traced, first, to *the softening influence of affliction*. “Behold,” he says, “my son, which came forth of my bowels, seeketh my life; how much more now may this Benjamite do it!” He here reminds his servants of the trials under which he was suffering; and intimates to them, that the father, who had to bear with the cruelty of a beloved son, could find but little difficulty in pardoning the insults of a reviling enemy; that the greater affliction had prepared his mind for the less, and enabled him to be submissive under it.

“Tribulation,” says the apostle, “worketh patience.” It calls the patience of the Christian into exercise, and consequently strengthens it. It enables him to bear even the indignation of an almighty God, much more the reproaches of a feeble man! And what is the language of daily experience? It confirms the testimony of the apostle. Who are the proud and revengeful among mankind? They who have known but little of the calamities of life, and been tossed by few of its storms. But where shall we look for the meek and long-suffering? Among the children of affliction; among those whom the archers have sorely grieved, and the shafts of adversity deeply wounded.

The afflicted Christian then must remember, that the more he is called on to bear, the more he is expected to be able to bear; that his heavenly Father sends him troubles to soften the fierceness of his nature; that no sorrows, however severely felt and patiently borne, have done their appointed work, unless they have taught him to love his enemies, to bless them when they curse him, and to pray for them when they despitefully use him.

II. We may observe further, that David was assisted in subduing his resentment *by tracing the persecution he received to God*. “Let him curse,” said he to the indignant Abishai, “because the Lord hath said unto him, Curse David. Who shall then say, Wherefore hast thou done so?” “Let him alone, and let him curse, for the Lord hath bidden him.”

Had Shimei then really received a command from God to persecute his sovereign? No; his duty was to honour and assist him. But David looked above the instrument to the hand which employed it, and he bowed with reverence to the stroke it inflicted, regarding it as coming not from the scourge of man, but from his Father’s rod.

Here then we are taught that the revilings of the ungodly, as well as the natural evils of life, must be ascribed to a chastising God; that the malice and

cruelty of the world are no less the instruments of working his will, than the diseases which assail our bodies, or the storms which lay waste our dwellings. "He maketh even the wrath of man to praise him." Holding all things in his mighty grasp, and bending them to his will, he forces the wild passions of the human heart to do him service, to minister to his glory, and to humble and sanctify his beloved saints. Not that he excites men to acts of injustice, or that evil ceases to be evil when he overrules it for good. The people of Jerusalem, when they slew the Lord of glory, were gathered together to do only what "the hand and counsel of God" had determined before, in the riches of his grace, to be done; but it was the prince of this world who came and instigated Judas to betray the holy Jesus, and the Jews to crucify him. Millions of the perishing have been saved through their crime; but the guilt of it rested on their heads, and still rests on the heads of their miserable children.

But while the words of the persecuted king of Israel teach us to ascribe the injuries we receive to God, his conduct shows us the advantage of thus connecting them with him—we shall be enabled to bear them with tranquillity and patience. While we consider any of our trials as proceeding solely from the hostile dispositions of our fellow-creatures, it is impossible to be submissive under them. They must disturb our peace, and excite our resentment. But let us once regard them as coming from the unseen hand of a Being who loves us, and these agitating provocations seem to change their nature; they appear in another light, and the feelings which accompany them, are of a new and altogether different kind. Anger against the offending creature gives place to humiliation before the offended Creator, and the thirst for revenge is succeeded by an earnest seeking after mercy. When therefore our enemies speak evil of us, here lies the secret of possessing our souls in patience—to look through second causes and human agency, and to say with David, "The Lord hath bidden them." When they oppress and afflict us, this is the source from which we must draw our meekness, and this the reasoning by which we must silence all the suggestions of revenge, "The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?"

III. Hence the forbearance of David may be ascribed, thirdly, to *a sense of sin*. This is not indeed expressly mentioned by him; but the abrupt language which he uses, evidently implies it. Shimei accused him of the death of Saul, and of this charge his conscience acquitted him; but the accusations of his enemy brought the murdered Uriah to his mind, and while he hears himself called "a bloody man," he meekly submits to the reproaches with which an avenging God permits him to be assailed.

And what provocation is there, which a deep sense of guilt will not enable us to bear? To have a broken and contrite heart, is to have a heart prepared for every provocation, and unable to be overcome by any. Go to the man

whom a heavenly instructor has made acquainted with the hidden depravity of his nature; who is day by day retiring to his closet to mourn over his sins, and who often waters his couch with tears by night as he thinks of his transgressions—try the patience of the stricken penitent by insults and revilings; and what is the result? Does his eye flash with rage, and is his tongue heard to call for fire from heaven to avenge his wrongs? “No,” says the wounded Christian, “I am a sinner, and wrath must not lodge in a sinner’s soul. I may be reviled, but what a miracle of mercy is it that I am not consumed! Men may reproach me, but how ought I to wonder that my God forbears to curse and destroy me! Am I not hour after hour provoking his indignation, trying his long-suffering to the very utmost? And shall I, in the midst of all the sins I am committing, and all the patience and mercy I am receiving, refuse to bear with the fellow-sinner whom he sends to me to call my guilt to remembrance? Shall the never-dying worm be withheld, and yet the wretch who deserves its anguish, make a reviling word an occasion of wrath? Shall the righteous Judge be so ready to pardon, and the criminal whom he has saved from execution, so quick to revenge? O let me struggle with the anger that is so often rising within me! Let a sense of my guilt drive it from my soul, and cause me to adore the patience which keeps me from destruction!”

Is this the language of your hearts, brethren, when you are tried by provocations? It surely ought to be their language; for which of you can say that you have lived a single hour without incurring the displeasure of God, and experiencing his forbearance? We are all the children of wrath; our multiplied sins have made wrath our portion; and yet where are we? Lifting up our eyes in the torments we have merited? No; we are living in a world of mercy, upheld by the power of the very Being whom we are hourly offending, and fed by his bounty. And why does he keep us here? That he may make us an offer of reconciliation; and when we despise and spurn his mercy, that he may offer it to us again, and beseech us to accept it; that we may be softened and won by the love which sent his Son to the cross, and lay hold of the glorious salvation which he has purchased. And can we be really aware of our situation, can we be really mindful of our sinfulness and the stupendous mercy that bears with it, and yet indulge malice and resentment? Can revenue dwell in the same heart with penitence, or hate reign over the soul that is affected, and warmed, and constrained, by the reconciling love of Jehovah? As soon might the gloom of midnight mingle with the noon-day brightness, or the storms of winter rage in the summer calm.

IV. The forbearance of David proceeded, fourthly, from *a humble expectation of a recompense from God*. Though he had sinned against him and was suffering under his righteous displeasure, he knew that the Lord had not utterly taken away his loving-kindness from him; that he was his Father still,

pitying him in his sorrows, and turning his chastisements into blessings. "It may be," said the confiding saint, "that the Lord will look on mine affliction, and that the Lord will requite me good for his cursing this day." And was he disappointed in his hope? No; the throne which had been wrested from him, was soon restored to him again, and he saw the persecuting Shimei kneeling at his feet. Neither was this all. The God in whom he hoped, recorded in his word the patience of his servant, and is giving him at the present moment its peaceable fruits.

What a powerful motive to patience and forbearance is here! When we are persecuted, the Lord looks on our afflictions. "He knows our reproach, and our shame, and our dishonour; our adversaries are all before him." Not one step can they take, but he marks it well; not an injurious word can they utter, which he does not hear. Nay, more; not a reproach can they offer us, which he will not recompense. There is a blessing connected with every curse of the ungodly; and when we arrive in heaven, we shall wonder to see how much their revilings have added to the brightness of our crown. What is persecution then? An evil to be endured and forgotten? It is a blessing to be prized. It may be grievous to flesh and blood; but he who revealed himself to the persecuted Stephen, still looks down on his suffering people, and gives them from the throne of his glory the same cheering assurance that he gave them on earth, "Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven."

But the language of David does not concern the persecuted only; it calls upon the despiteful and injurious to consider their ways. You feel perhaps, brethren, a strong and almost unconquerable enmity against some professors of religion. Their principles appear to you degrading, and their conduct absurd. You consequently think yourselves warranted in directing heavy censures against them, and too often their inconsistencies appear to sanction your reproaches. But what, if the men you are reviling should be really holier than you; and, though poor and afflicted, the beloved servants of God! Will their meanness stop your revilings from ascending to heaven, or their infirmities prevent your hard sayings from being registered there? Not even though they themselves should pray that these sins may not be laid to your charge. And what will be the fruit of all the railings you have so thoughtlessly directed against them? Like waves dashing against a rock, they will be beaten back; they will return on yourselves, and overwhelm you with confusion and shame. The Christian dares not avenge the wrongs he undergoes, but every injury that he pardons, God will resent. The day of vengeance is already in his heart, and he will soon appear, in the terrors of his majesty, to avenge his abused and despised elect. Before an assembled world, he will plead their cause. "He will be with them as a mighty and terrible one, and then shall their

persecutors stumble, and shall not prevail; they shall be greatly ashamed, and their everlasting confusion shall not be forgotten.”

The words on which we have now been meditating, warrant us to infer in conclusion, that *David was not of a revengeful disposition*. A mind so softened by affliction, so fixed on God, so full of contrition and faith, could not be revengeful.

What meaning then must we assign to the charge which this injured monarch gave to his son, when the days drew nigh that he should die? “Behold,” says he, “thou hast with thee Shimei, the son of Gera, a Benjamite of Bahurim, which cursed me with a grievous curse when I went to Mahanaim; but he came down to meet me at Jordan, and I swore to him by the Lord, saying, I will not put thee to death with the sword. Now therefore hold him not guiltless, for thou art a wise man, and knowest what thou oughtest to do unto him; but his hoar head bring thou down to the grave with blood.” These words have often been represented as proceeding from a long cherished and inveterate desire of revenge; but into what an inextricable difficulty does this interpretation bring us? We behold a man of warm passions grossly and cruelly insulted; and, though armed with lawful authority to punish the injury, and urged by those around him to exercise it, yet quietly submitting to the insult, sparing and even protecting his enemy. We follow him a little farther, and we hear him publicly declaring the pardon of the offender, and confirming it with an oath. Hitherto all is consistent, but now the mystery begins. When this same man is brought to the bed of death, in the very hour when the prospect of eternity generally causes the most revengeful to lay aside their malice, we find him suddenly thirsting for vengeance, and, without any fresh provocation, coolly ordering the death of the enemy whom he had long ago pardoned.

And not only this, but the conduct of Solomon is as mysterious as that of David. Instead of at once condemning the traitor to death agreeably to the dying command of his father, he allows him to remain for three years unmolested in Jerusalem; and when he is at length ordered to execution, he suffers, not for his former crime, but for a new act of disobedience.

How then are we to account for such inconsistencies? They cannot be reconciled; and the language of David not only admits, but absolutely requires a different interpretation. We must consider it as dictated, not by a desire of revenge, but by a regard to justice, and a wise and pious concern for the peace of the kingdom, which Shimei wished to disturb. We have reason to think that the enmity of this ambitious man against the family of David, was not overcome by the lenity he had experienced, and that after his pardon, he still continued his seditious efforts to reinstate the family of Saul upon the throne. When therefore the sceptre of Israel was about to pass into

the hands of his inexperienced son, it was natural and necessary that David should warn him of the treacherous designs of his enemy, and give him his full permission to inflict on him the punishment he merited. "Hold him not guiltless," says he. "Remember his conduct, and regard him as the determined enemy of thy family and throne. I do not command thee to take away at once his forfeited life; for thou art a wise man, and knowest what thou oughtest to do unto him. Only mark his conduct; and as soon as he is detected in any fresh act of rebellion, let not the oath I have given him withhold thine hand. The peace of thy kingdom requires that thou shouldst surrender him to justice, and thou must bring down his hoar head to the grave with blood." Agreeably to this advice, Solomon calls Shimei before him as soon as he has ascended the throne; orders him to remain in Jerusalem, where all his movements might be watched; and never touches a hair of his head, till he had broken the command of the king, and again forfeited his life.

Now if this be a faithful interpretation of the words of David, why is this afflicted servant of God so often followed to his death-bed to be censured and reviled? The reason is obvious. The pretended believer in the Bible accuses him of malice, that he may lower the standard of Christian holiness to his own ungodly practice, and vindicate by his example the indulgence of the fiery passions which he cannot be prevailed on to subdue; while the infidel delights in ascribing vices to the man whose virtues he is too feeble to disprove, and too unholy to imitate. But let the hypocrite remember that one sinful disposition habitually indulged, though sanctioned by the example of all the creatures in the universe, will assuredly ruin his soul; and let the deluded sceptic beware how he cavils at that which he is either too thoughtless or too prejudiced to understand, lest, in attempting to show his superior wisdom, he manifests only the greatness of his folly. There is a noble carelessness in the inspired writings, which seems to invite the attacks of the blasphemer, but there is also a hidden strength which is sure to repel them.

We may infer also from the text, *the reason why so much importance is attached in the Scriptures to a forgiving spirit.*

It is impossible to read the New Testament without being struck with the frequency with which this Christian grace is inculcated, and the peculiar sanctions by which the practice of it is enforced. Not only the sincerity of our religious profession, but even our eternal salvation is made to depend on our possessing it. "If ye forgive men their trespasses," says Christ, "your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

But why is this duty so earnestly and so solemnly urged on us? And why are consequences so fearfully important connected with the breach of it? The text answers these enquiries. It shows us the grounds from which Christian forgiveness proceeds; and consequently it points out to us the dispositions of

which the revengeful are destitute. And what are these dispositions? A mind softened and subdued by the chastisements of heaven, and cherishing a firm and ever active belief in a superintending Providence; a heart deeply conscious of its guilt, and yet steadfastly hoping in the divine mercy. Now it is plain that these spiritual gifts lie at the very foundation of true religion; that the sinner who is destitute of them, can offer to God no worship which he will accept, nor have one feeling in his heart which he will approve. And is not this inference also equally plain, that as long as we remain the slaves of passion and malice, we are utter strangers to that “grace which bringeth salvation?” that our convictions of sin, however deep, are not the fruits of genuine contrition, but the mere workings of a guilty conscience? that our faith is presumption, and our hope a delusion?

Will your religion then bear to be brought to this test? Has it subdued the malignant passions of your nature? It found you irritable and revengeful; has it made you patient and forgiving? In your daily intercourse with your fellow-sinners, are you seen to be walking as the disciples of a meek and lowly Saviour, and the children of a long-suffering God?

It is vain, brethren, to turn away from such questions as these. It is vain to despise them as legal, or to slight them as righteous over-much. That holy Jesus who will one day call us to his bar, will never forget or despise these tests of our faith. On the throne of his glory, he will try us by them, yea, he is trying us by them now, and deciding by them whether we are among the people whom he has purchased with his blood. Judge yourselves then by the standard by which you are judged of your Lord. Bring your dispositions and tempers, as well as your opinions and feelings, to the test of scripture. What is that religion worth, which does not sweeten the temper and reign over the heart? It may clothe a man with a form of godliness; it may give rise to many lively emotions within him; it may quiet his conscience; it may even send him out of the world tranquil and fearless; but it cannot make him meet for a kingdom of peace and love; it cannot save his soul. “The wisdom which is from above, is first pure, then peaceable and gentle;” but that which leaves bitter envying and strife in the heart, “descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, and devilish.” He who is under its influence, and yet calls himself a believer in Jesus, “lies against the truth,” and his glory shall be turned into shame. But what shall be the portion of those, whom a consciousness of guilt, and a sense of pardoning love, have made the followers of peace? “They shall be called the children of God.” “The God of peace” shall be with them and bless them while they live; and when they die, they shall see the Lord. They shall go to a world, where “the wicked cease from troubling,” and where “the weary are at rest.” They shall “dwell in a peaceable habitation, and in sure dwellings, and in quiet resting-places;” and be filled with that abundant and everlasting peace “which passeth all understanding.”