

SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

BY

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SERMON IV.

THE REWARDS OF THE CONQUERING CHRISTIAN.

REVELATION ii. 17.

To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth, saving he that receiveth it.

THIS is one of those encouraging promises, which were given by our ascended Lord to the persecuted churches of Asia. But the blessings of which it speaks, must not be confined to those primitive saints. At this very hour, they are possessed and enjoyed by many a humble follower of Christ, and there is not a penitent sinner breathing on the earth, who may not seek and obtain them. He then that "hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches;" and may that glorified Saviour who has sent us this gracious message from heaven, give us a heart to receive it with reverence, and to embrace the mercies it offers us, with gratitude and joy!

In proceeding to apply these condescending words to ourselves, we may consider, first, the description they give us of the person to whom they are addressed; and, secondly, the blessings they promise him.

I. The text is addressed to "him that overcometh."

1. Now the man to whom this description can be applied, must obviously be one who *knows that he has spiritual enemies assailing him*. He must have discovered that he has interests at stake, which the world, the flesh, and the devil, unite in opposing; that he has objects to attain, which he cannot accomplish without exposing himself to their attacks, and overcoming their influence; that if he would be holy in this world, and happy in the world which is to come, he must be prepared to make the remainder of his life one continued scene of watchfulness and conflict.

There are very few among us, who are really come to such a conviction as this. We hear of spiritual enemies, and we profess to give their existence a place in our creed; but the greater part of us are not conscious of being incessantly subject to their assaults. We have lived in the world and mixed perhaps without hesitation in its pursuits and pleasures; but we have not found either the one or the other injurious to the concerns of eternity, or hindering us in the least in our journey to heaven. Neither have we been materially harassed by the lusts of the flesh. It is true that we have often cherished thoughts and desires which we should blush for even a child to know; but

then we have ascribed these secret workings of our mind to the frailty of our nature, and they have never drawn one tear from our eyes, nor given one pang to our hearts. As for the influence of Satan, we have neither dreaded nor felt it, and we hesitate not to rank it among the reveries of enthusiasm or the imaginary terrors of superstition. It is plain then, that as long as these are our opinions and feelings, we cannot be the persons addressed in the text. We have not so much as beheld an enemy, and can have no pretensions to the rewards of him who has fought and overcome.

2. But the idea of a victory necessarily presupposes a contest. The language before us must imply therefore, that the man to whom these blessings are promised *is contending with the enemies by whom he finds himself surrounded*. It describes the Christian, not as the friend of the world, but the determined opposer of its corrupt maxims and customs; not as the obedient slave of the prince of darkness, but his decided and vigilant foe.

It intimates also, that there is a warfare going on within the man's own breast: and what warfare can be compared with that which the Christian is secretly carrying on there? When Satan and the world trouble him, they are opposed and silenced; but his own heart, though he may think it subdued one hour, makes him weep and tremble the next. Here the flesh is ever lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; here the law of sin wars against the law of grace; here pure and heavenly affections contend with earthly and sensual desires. Here an unceasing and painful battle is fought, and here the victory and the crown are won.

It is this habitual conflict with evil, which constitutes the great difference between the servant of God and the man of the world. The one is at peace with sin and willingly yields to its dominion, while the other no sooner feels himself tied and bound in its chains, than he begins to contend against it and to struggle for freedom. It is this which proves us to be in earnest in our religious profession. It is this which testifies that our understandings are enlightened, that our conscience is on the side of God, that our affections have been touched by his grace, and a principle of a new and spiritual life sent down from heaven into our souls.

3. But we must not stop here. The text leads us to infer that the Christian *is actually overcoming his enemies*.

And this is an inference, brethren, which cannot be too plainly and earnestly pressed on our notice. The truth it involves is of the very highest importance to our eternal interests; and yet there is no truth which we seem so determined to forget, and so anxious to discredit. Whence arise the many strange and unscriptural notions of religion, which prevail among us; and to what cause must we ascribe the multiplied errors which, in every age, have beguiled and distracted the Christian church? Is the gospel so hard to be understood; or is the book which contains its glad tidings, so vague and

obscure? No; our spiritual ignorance must be traced chiefly to our spiritual wickedness. We have cherished cavils and doubts, we have applauded the wildest and most contradictory tenets; and why? Because they have superseded the necessity of practical holiness, or tended to lower its standard; because they have taught us that a man may be the slave of his lusts, and yet the friend of his God; that we may take our share of the follies and sins of this world, and yet enter, when we die, into all the purity and joys of the next. But how plainly does the text we are considering, condemn such notions as these! It speaks of religion as an arduous conflict, and it promises its blessings to none but a conqueror. To be contending with our spiritual enemies is not enough. It tells us that we must be overcoming, as well as resisting them; triumphing over evil, as well as opposing and hating it.

Not that the foes of our peace can ever be destroyed, or that we, on this side of the grave, can be exempt from their assaults. Through all the changing scenes of our life they will follow us, and even on our dying bed they will strive to harm us. But though pursued and harassed, the Christian is day by day beating down his enemies. The world is gradually losing its power to tempt and disturb him; Satan is bruised underneath his feet; and as for his lusts, they are one by one weakened and subdued. He may not indeed be always conscious of the progress he is making in holiness; he may often be found weeping over his defeats, instead of rejoicing in his triumphs; yea, there may be seasons in which he may deem himself an utter stranger to the spiritual warfare; but the victories he is obtaining, though hidden from himself, are visible to others. Angels see them and rejoice. His Christian brethren behold them, and pray for the grace which has enabled him to win them. In the midst of his many infirmities, and fears, and occasional declensions, he is seen to be “perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord;” becoming more humble, more submissive, more earnest, more spiritually-minded; longing more for heaven, and growing in a meetness for its pure and exalted joys.

O what a blessed victory is this! Who does not long to share in its honours and inherit its rewards! But these rewards are not easily attained, neither is this victory easily won. No mortal power can achieve it. We may form the most sincere and steadfast resolutions, and prepare for the most vigorous efforts; but the first assaults of temptation will discover to us that we have entered on an unequal contest, and leave us wondering at our own weakness. Even if the world and the devil had ceased to be our enemies, we are no more able to overcome the rebellious passions of our own hearts, than we are to bind in chains the waves of a raging ocean. The mere professor of religion may cavil at this statement; but he who is actually striving to root out his lusts, will soon be constrained to admit its truth. He will soon be heard to confess that he can do nothing, that he is absolutely helpless, and must either give up the conflict in despair, or seek the aid of an arm stronger than his

own. The victory must be ascribed to God alone. It is he who gives us at first a disposition to struggle with our adversaries; it is he who crowns that struggle with success. "Not unto us," has ever been the language of the church in its warfare, "not unto us, O Lord, but unto thy name be the praise." And its language in the day of its triumph is the same; "Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb."

II. But though the victory is the Lord's, he often condescends to speak of it as though it were attained by the Christian himself; and to strengthen his arm and stimulate his exertions, he promises him in the text a gracious and rich reward. "To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna; and I will give him a white stone, and in the stone anew name written, which no man knoweth, saving he that receiveth it."

1. One of the blessings comprehended in this promise is *pardon*. Does the Christian conqueror then need pardon? Yes, brethren, as much as the most guilty of his race can need it. In the midst of all the honours which the Captain of his salvation puts on him, and all the trials which he endures for his sake, he feels that he is an unworthy sinner still, and is constrained to be often mourning over his sinfulness, and supplicating mercy at the footstool of Jehovah's throne. The text addresses him as a sinner; "To him that overcometh will I give a white stone."

In this expression, there is evidently an allusion to the custom which prevailed in the ancient courts of justice, of declaring the acquittal or condemnation of a criminal by delivering to him a stone. If acquitted, he received a white, if condemned, a black stone. Here a white stone is promised to the overcoming believer; and no figure can more clearly express that complete absolution from guilt, which is conferred on the contrite sinner, as soon as he applies by faith to the great Redeemer.

The God who created him, gave him a law, and he has a thousand times daringly broken it. He consequently stands at his bar as a base and heinous transgressor. The black stone of condemnation is about to be given him, and the dreadful sentence of the violated law to be pronounced by his Judge. But no curse proceeds from the awful throne before him. One wearing his form and clothed in all the glories of the Godhead, becomes his advocate, and pleads his cause. "I," says the glorified Jesus, "am that sinner's friend. He has fled to my cross for refuge, and sooner shall heaven and earth fail, than a sinner perish there. There was indeed a time, when he made me to serve with his sins, and wearied me with his iniquities; but the vengeance which he merited, was poured out on mine own head, and there is now no condemnation remaining for him. Behold my hands and my side. In this body I was wounded for his transgressions, and bruised for his iniquities; I ransomed and bought him with my blood; and though my enemies may blaspheme and

my friends may wonder, I will give him a white stone, a free and full discharge.”

And is not this a great, an unspeakably precious blessing, to have our guilt cancelled? to have those manifold iniquities which are so often filling our hearts with fear and sadness, all pardoned and forgotten? to be in no more danger of the tremendous sentence we have incurred, than as though we had never fallen into one transgression? Who that has felt the anguish of a guilty conscience, will not say with the pardoned psalmist, “Blessed is he whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sin is covered?”

2. If pardon then were all that the Christian conqueror received from his Lord, we might still say that never conqueror was rewarded so abundantly as he; but pardon is not all. A mere acquittal is too poor a gift for the Captain of his salvation to bestow, and he adds to it the blessing of *adoption*. “To him that overcometh will I give a white stone, and in the stone a new name written.”

And what is this new name? Here again we must refer to the customs of the east. When a prince raised any one of his subjects to extraordinary dignity, or adopted him into his family, it was usual to give him a new name, expressive of his elevation and his connection with his benefactor. Thus Pharaoh changed the name of Joseph, when he raised him to honour; and thus also the three Hebrew youths were called by new names, when they were received into the house of Nebuchadnezzar. When therefore the exalted Jesus promises to his triumphant people a new name, he promises them all the blessings of his Father’s house, all the happiness and glory which are the portion of the sons of God.

When he first began to look on them in mercy, he found them the members of another family, and the children of another parent. In love with folly and sin, they had wandered far from God, and had joined themselves to a family of which the prince of darkness is the head. But he determined to bring back the wretched prodigals to their forsaken home. With his own blood, he reconciled them, even while they were yet enemies, to his Father; by his obedience unto death, he wrought out for them a righteousness which gives them a name and a place among his children; and by his Spirit he renews their souls, restores to them his forfeited image, and makes them meet for the employments and joys of their heavenly habitation. “As many as received him,” says Saint John, “to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe in his name.” Yea, so anxious is he to reveal to them the honour to which he has raised them, and to gladden their hearts with a prospect of its happiness, that he sends down the Spirit himself from heaven to bear witness with their spirit that they are “the children of God; and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ.”

The manner in which this new name is given to the acquitted criminal, is also remarkable. It is written or engraven on the stone which declares his pardon, and is consequently inseparable from it. The inference is obvious—adoption into the family of heaven is inseparably connected with the forgiveness of sins. As soon as the penitent sinner is “justified by faith,” he has “peace with God,” and from that hour is regarded by him as his beloved child. He may not indeed have immediate evidence of his adoption; fearfulness and distrust may for a season weigh him down; yea, he may sometimes mourn over himself as an unpardoned heir of wrath; but notwithstanding his fears and doubts, his fetters have been broken. Satan has lost a servant, whom he never will regain. He is “no more a stranger or foreigner, but a fellow-citizen with the saints, and of the household of God.” The angels rejoice over him as a monument of infinite mercy, and a future partaker of their bliss. The glorified Jesus regards him with a love that “passeth knowledge.” God himself “is not ashamed to be called his God,” and prepares for his long lost but now recovered son, a never ending feast of joy.

3. Hence *spiritual provision* is another blessing included in this promise. “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna.”

By a reference to the sixteenth chapter of Exodus, we find Moses commanding Aaron to fill a vessel with the manna which the Israelites had received from heaven, and to lay it up in the tabernacle, as a memorial to succeeding generations of the power and goodness which, for forty years, had provided bread for their fathers in a wilderness. The manna was accordingly placed in the ark of the covenant in the most holy place, where it remained hidden or secret, as none but the high priest could ever look on it, and he once only in the year. To this hidden manna the words before us undoubtedly allude; and the blessing intimated by them, is that spiritual provision with which the bountiful Jesus feeds, and strengthens, and blesses, his adopted sons. To eat of it is to have the soul nourished and refreshed with the bread of life; to have all its wants supplied; to taste of those divine consolations which, even in this world of trouble, can make the sinner’s heart overflow with blessedness; to live upon the fulness of an infinite God, and to be abundantly satisfied therewith. Nay more; to eat of this hidden manna is to partake of the bread of heaven; to be admitted, when the wilderness of life is past, into the immediate presence of Jehovah; to dwell before his throne in the holy place of his heavenly temple; to hunger no more and to thirst no more; but to have the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne, to feed us, and to lead us unto living fountains of water, and to wipe away all tears from our eyes.

The manna of which the Christian is permitted to eat, is said to be “hidden” manna; and the new name which is given to him, is a secret name, a name “which no man knoweth, saving he that receiveth it.” Now this

language implies that the blessings of adoption and spiritual consolation can be comprehended by those only, who have been made partakers of them. No other man can have any adequate conception of their sweetness or their value; for he has not a taste adapted to them, nor an understanding capable of estimating their worth. He is “dead in trespasses and sins,” and can know nothing of the spiritual life which those receive, who are born from above. “Their life is hid” from an ungodly world “with Christ in God.” “A stranger doth not intermeddle with their joy.” “The secret of the Lord,” says the psalmist, “is with them that fear him, and he will show them his covenant.” “Now we have received,” says the apostle, “not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

And now let us turn to ourselves. We have heard of the blessings offered by our ascended Lord to the sinners of mankind, and we have the character of those who are inheriting these blessings, plainly marked out to us. Is it our character? Can we trace in it a resemblance to our own feelings and conduct? Are we struggling against our spiritual adversaries? Are we overcoming sin? Has the world lost its power to entice and govern us? Is Satan vanquished? Are our neighbours, are the inmates of our habitations, ready to testify of us, that there is a power in our religion, a consistency in our character, an increasing holiness in our dispositions and conduct? Then, brethren, the promise before us ought to be to us as life from the dead. Its sound ought to chase away our fears, to animate our courage, to fill our souls with love, to put “a new song in our mouth, even a thanksgiving unto our God.” In every season of despondency, let us think of it and be comforted. In every season of coldness, let us remember it and strive to warm our hearts to gratitude and praise. It tells us of guilt cancelled, of hell escaped, of God reconciled, of heaven won; and where is the perishing sinner who can think of such blessings as these, and not be constrained to feel and to love? The criminal condemned to die, would think that he could never sufficiently testify his gratitude to the man who should obtain for him a reprieve. And shall that Friend be forgotten, who delivered us from the wrath to come, by laying down his life in our stead? How would the starving and houseless beggar thank the benefactor who should receive him into his family, and give him food and raiment among his children! And shall we be cold and thankless towards that exalted Being who stooped down from his throne when he saw us perishing, and lifted us up from the dust, and made us the children of God and the heirs of his glory? No, brethren; the reprieved criminal may be joyless; the adopted beggar may be thankless; but the pardoned sinner must go “on his way

rejoicing;” with “the praises of God in his mouth,” as well as “a two-edged sword in his hand.”

There is also another class of persons whom the gracious words before us were designed to cheer. You have reason to hope perhaps, that you are not altogether strangers to true religion. Your principles, your feelings, your conduct, have undergone a material change. You are anxiously seeking to “win Christ,” and to be “found in him.” As you hear of the blessings promised to the conquering Christian, you feel them to be the very blessings that you need, and would think them cheaply purchased by a whole life of conflict; yea, you would rejoice to part, not only with every sin, but with every earthly comfort that is dear to you, and welcome the deepest poverty and tribulation, so that you might inherit these promises. But you dare not hope that you have any interest in them. Though struggling with your enemies, and praying, and striving, and longing for, a victory over them, you have not yet vanquished them, and you deem it presumption to claim a conqueror’s rewards. The human heart is exceedingly deceitful, brethren, and its deepest emotions must be regarded with suspicion; but if these are the sincere feelings of your heart, and if they are habitually influencing your life, making you humble, watchful, prayerful, there is not a blessing in this promise of your Lord, nay, there is not a blessing spoken of in the Scriptures, which you are not warranted to rejoice in as your own. You may weep and tremble; there may be fightings without and fears within; but the white stone, the new name, the hidden manna, are already yours. The promise is made, not to him that has overcome, but to him that is overcoming; not to him who has completely gained the victory, but to him who is gaining it, whose enemies are not destroyed, but weakened and gradually yielding. If you are thus warring a good warfare, the promise is made to you; and though you deem yourselves condemned and perishing, the God before whom you tremble, regards you as his pardoned and adopted children, and will soon give you, before an assembled universe, a victor’s crown. Ignorance and unbelief may rob you for a season of your comfort; but continue humbly and resolutely fighting the “good fight of faith,” persevere in watchfulness and prayer, let a sense of your own utter weakness keep you still flying for help to your almighty Saviour, and after a few more years of conflict and trouble, your warfare shall end in the shouts of triumph, and your tears be turned into songs of everlasting joy.

But the language of the text is calculated to excite enquiry, as well as to impart consolation. It speaks of blessings, and it offers them freely to the unworthy and the guilty; but then it tells us that none but the warring and overcoming will receive them. What then is your religion? Is it a conflict? a wrestling? an incomplete, but a visible and progressive victory? If it is not a warfare, it is nothing. It is a profession, a name, and nothing more; a form which is no more like the religion that saves the soul, than a statue is like a

living man. Your disposition may be peaceable and even amiable; you may be as blameless in your outward conduct, as the unconverted Saul, and as warm in your zeal; you may hear the joyful sound of the gospel, and approve and defend its glorious truths; they may even play about your imagination, and at seasons reach your heart; but if you are not habitually withstanding and overcoming the corruptions that are in the world, if there is no struggle with sin going on within your breast, if Satan is not feared and resisted, you have no more part or lot in the salvation of Jesus, than the man who has never heard of his name. Your sins are unpardoned, your sentence of death unrepealed, your soul perishing. Where there is no conflict, there can be no victory. Where there is no victory, there will be no white stone of absolution, no new name, no hidden manna, no crown.