

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 V.

THE ISRAELITES RETURNING FROM BABYLON.

JEREMIAH I. 4, 5.

In those days and in that time, saith the Lord, the children of Israel shall come, they and the children of Judah together, going and weeping: they shall go and seek the Lord their God. They shall ask the way to Zion with their faces thitherward, saying, Come, and let us join ourselves to the Lord in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten.

THESE words may be considered as a prophecy of the future conversion and restoration of the Jews; but this was not their primary meaning. They are connected with a striking prediction of the overthrow of the Chaldean empire, and evidently relate to the liberation of the Israelites from their long captivity in Babylon, and their consequent return to their own land. They however are not the only people who have been enslaved by enemies. We ourselves are in a state of still more wretched bondage, and may learn from the contemplation of their captivity and deliverance, a useful lesson of humiliation and hope.

Adapting the subject before us to our own spiritual situation and circumstances, let us consider, first, the state of the Jews in Babylon; secondly, their deliverance from it; and, thirdly, the feelings with which they began their return to the land of their fathers.

I. 1. The captive Israelites were obviously in a *degraded state*. They were once a great and free people, secure under the special protection of God, and honoured by his peculiar favour. They are now strangers in a foreign country, obeying the will of their proud conquerors, and visited with the judgments of heaven.

And what is the state of man, but a state of degradation? He boasts of the dignity of his nature, but an angel might weep over its baseness. He is prouder than the inhabitants of heaven, but he has brought himself almost to a level with the brutes that perish. The image of God, in which he was created, has been defaced, his friendship lost. The soul that once ruled over the body in which it dwelt, is now become its slave, held in captivity by its lusts, tyrannized over by the most vile and hateful dispositions, lost to all sense of its own original excellence, and sunk so low as even to love its degradation.

2. But the condition of the Jews in their captivity was as *wretched*, as it

was degrading. Though treated by their conquerors with more than usual lenity, they appear to have been reduced to the lowest state of despondency. At a distance from Jerusalem, their beloved temple destroyed, their holy convocations and solemn sacrifices passed away, they sit down by the waters of Babylon and weep. Their harps, which in Zion had ever been attuned to joy, are now hung upon the willows; and their songs are turned into bitter lamentations.

We too are a suffering, as well as an abased people. Once indeed the world was a paradise, but sin has entered it, withered its beauty, and robbed it of its happiness. Thorns and briars, toil and care, pain and sorrow, have completely overspread it, so that there is not a spot on its surface, on which we can set our foot and say, Here is rest. On every condition of man, on every nation, yea, on every family, have been written, in characters more or less legible, "Lamentation, mourning, and woe." And what is to follow the years of misery, which we are spending here? The agonies of death and the darkness of the grave.

3. Our state, like that of the captive Jews, is also a *guilty* state. It was sin which caused them to be delivered into the hands of their enemies; and it is sin which has made us base and wretched. Our first father transgressed and died; but the vengeance which followed his transgression, deterred not his children from treading in his steps. They inherited his depraved nature, and they have obeyed its lusts. Since the hour in which the prince of darkness first erected his throne in the world, the world has been his kingdom, and its inhabitants have willingly obeyed his dreadful laws. We ourselves have shared in the common guilt. We cannot look into our own bosoms, nor examine the history of our own lives, without finding there the most distressing reasons to mourn over ourselves as rebels who have revolted from the most gracious of sovereigns, and as children who are daily sinning against the most tender of fathers. To say nothing of the follies of our childhood and the sins of our youth, how many iniquities have we willingly and daringly committed since we attained the age of manhood! How many words have we uttered, which ought never to have passed our lips! How many thoughts have we indulged, which we should shudder to make known! How many evil dispositions have we cherished! How many afflictions have we despised, and how many mercies slighted! Yea, brethren, which of us can look back even on the week that has just passed, and not find in the retrospect, abundant and irresistible evidence of our apostacy from God? Which of us is not constrained to cry out, "Enter not into judgment with thy servant, O Lord, for in thy sight shall no man living be justified?"

4. But this is not all. The enslaved Jews were in a *helpless* state. Though

prophecies of deliverance were given them, they saw not how these predictions could be fulfilled. Their enemies were too much in love with power willingly to liberate their captives; and their own number had been so much reduced by the sword, that they could never hope to regain their liberty by force.

And what power have we to rescue ourselves from that state of guilt and wretchedness, into which we are fallen? The law which we have violated, denounces misery on our heads, a misery as great and lasting as our guilt; and who can resist its authority or repeal its curse? We have yielded our souls to the dominion of sin; we have debased and polluted them; and who is he that can cleanse them, and deliver them from their bondage? We have lost even the desire of being made free from sin, and would rather perish than cease to obey it. Our guilt has made our situation desperate, and our inveterate depravity has confirmed its hopelessness. The Bible accordingly describes us as lost and helpless, destroyed and perishing, utterly undone.

Have we felt this to be our condition? Are we really sincere when we acknowledge that “we are tied and bound by the chain of our sins,” and call ourselves “miserable sinners?” Do we heartily believe the account which the Scriptures give us of our fallen state? And are we day by day mourning over our degradation, our misery, our guilt, and our helplessness? Then we, as well as the enslaved Jews, have a promise of deliverance, and may contemplate their liberation as a representation and pledge of our own.

II. 1. In proceeding therefore to our second subject of consideration, we may observe, first, that the deliverance of the Israelites from their bondage *was effected for them by the power of another*. They themselves were not the authors of it, and contributed nothing towards it. The appointed years of their captivity were come to an end, and they were as powerless and helpless as they had been at first; but the God against whom they had sinned, raised up a deliverer for them. He directed Cyrus to lay siege to the city of their enemies, and crowned his arms with success. Babylon was taken, and the Jews were permitted by the conqueror to return to their own land, and to dwell in the inheritance of their fathers.

Now this Cyrus was a type of Christ, the great spiritual Deliverer; and if we are ever brought out of our spiritual bondage, we must be content to owe our liberty solely to him, to disclaim all the glory of it, and to give him all the praise. It was he who, unsolicited and unexpected, came and wrought out redemption for his undone people. He saw them guilty, prisoners to divine justice, and about to be consigned to destruction; and though they spurned his help, he made his own soul an offering for their sin; he silenced the thunders of the law by the sacrifice of his own blood, and now, when they fly

to him for refuge, he sets them as free from its curse, as though they had never sinned. He beheld them in subjection to sin and Satan, and trembling under the power and fear of death; he came and overthrew their enemies, and burst their bonds. He made an end of sin; he destroyed death; he bruised Satan underneath their feet. Their degradation too was not overlooked by him. They were in exile, and they were wretched there; but he raised them up from their low estate, and recovered for them the blessedness they had lost. He is now employed in restoring them to their forfeited inheritance; in leading them, not to a city lying desolate and whose walls are to be rebuilt in troublous times by their own wearied hands, but to a city which has been for ages prepared and adorned for them; a city “which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” He is bringing those nigh to God, who were once far off; he is guiding a company of wretched aliens back again to their long lost country; yea, he has already restored a countless number of prodigals to the home from which they had wandered, and made them safe in a father’s house, and happy in a father’s arms.

And who, brethren, has been his helper in effecting this wondrous redemption? Review the deliverance you have obtained, and say where in its varied and mighty labours, you have aided your Deliverer. There is no part of the work, that you can claim as your own. You have done nothing, absolutely nothing. You feel and confess your insufficiency; and there are seasons when you value your redemption the more, because it is not the work of your own hands, because you have received it from the free and unmerited bounty of the Friend whom you love. Act then upon this conviction. Have “no confidence in the flesh.” Think not of completing by your own strength a work which your own power never could have begun. Rely simply and steadfastly on Christ. Rejoice in him. Live to his praise.

2. The deliverance of the Israelites *was also openly proclaimed and freely offered*. Long before it took place, it was made the frequent subject of prophecy; and when Cyrus had determined on liberating the captives, he ordered a proclamation of freedom to be carried into all parts of the land. It was published everywhere by the voice of watchmen on the tops of the mountains, that none might be ignorant of it; and none were excluded from the joyful tidings of deliverance it contained.

To this proclamation Saint Paul alludes in the tenth chapter of his epistle to the Romans, and speaks of it as a representation of the preaching of the gospel to the enslaved nations of the earth. No sooner had man sinned, than a promise of redemption was given him; and through many succeeding ages, this promise was frequently renewed and more extensively made known. At length, in the fulness of time, the great Deliverer came, bringing “good tidings of good,” and publishing salvation and peace. He himself preached his

gospel to the poor. He proclaimed “liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.” And when he was about to leave the habitation of men, he commanded his disciples to carry the news of salvation throughout a perishing world; to suffer no poor captive to continue ignorant of the redemption wrought out for him, but to call upon all to flee from destruction, and to return with penitence and faith to their reconciled God. From that period to the present hour, the voice of mercy has never ceased to be heard. We have had “the bread of adversity and the water of affliction,” but the heralds of Jesus have still been going to and fro in the earth; and the time, we trust, is rapidly approaching, when the eyes of all men shall see their teachers; when the name of the Lord shall be proclaimed on the top of every mountain, and every valley resound with his praise.

And to whom are the rich blessings of this salvation offered? To all who hear of them. Not a sinner on the earth is excluded. Among the thousands who are groaning in bondage, there is not one too guilty to be ransomed, or too miserable to be redeemed and blessed. Sinners, the chief of sinners, the lost, the perishing, are the very persons to whom the proclamation of mercy is addressed, the very captives for whom a way of escape has been opened. We ourselves, brethren, are interested in these tidings of deliverance. Salvation from sin and its consequences, is at this very hour freely and most graciously offered us. Have we accepted it? Are we rescued, ransomed, made free? No enquiry can be more important than this, and there is none to which some amongst us are more anxious to obtain a satisfactory reply. The text will aid us in answering it.

III. The proclamation of Cyrus was received by the Jews with very different feelings. Some of them regarded it with indifference; they had obtained property and formed connexions in the land of their captivity, and were content to remain there: while others welcomed the tidings it brought them with the most exulting joy, and immediately began their journey to their native land. The prophet, in the words before us, describes *the feelings with which this journey was commenced*; and they are the very feelings with which every redeemed sinner begins his pilgrimage to the heavenly Zion. O that we may be able to trace in them the workings of our own minds, and have cause to rejoice over ourselves as the ransomed of the Lord, and travellers to his kingdom!

1. As we behold the Israelites leaving in a body the land of the Chaldeans, the first circumstance which arrests our attention, is *their penitence*. The children of Israel and the children of Judah are described as going and “weeping.”

But why do they weep? The mercy they have received has softened their

hearts. It has shown them the tenderness of their heavenly Father towards his rebellious children, and taught them to view the sins which they have committed against him in their proper light. They once regarded him as their avenging Judge, and the thought but little affected them; now they regard him as their pardoning and redeeming God, and a sense of his love causes them to be ashamed of their past ingratitude, and to weep as they remember their guilt.

This godly sorrow is, in every instance, one of the first fruits of genuine religion. By nature our hearts are hard, so hard that the most awful judgments can make no abiding impression on them; but when we are roused out of our spiritual unconcern by the Spirit of God, and begin to look with the eye of faith on the great Saviour of sinners, a train of new and deep emotions is excited within us. Our religion immediately assumes a new character. There is a feeling, a life, an energy in it; and we comprehend, for the first time, what is meant by the religion of the heart. Our former associates are as gay perhaps and as thoughtless as ever, but we can no more forbear to weep, than the stricken deer to bleed. When we contemplate the greatness, the majesty, and the wonderful purity, of the Being against whom we have so daringly sinned, we are filled with shame and sorrow; but when we think of his forbearance in sparing us so long in the world notwithstanding our rebellion against him, and of the grace which stopped us in our dreadful course and snatched us as brands from the burning; when we look back to the misery from which we have been delivered, and extend our view forward to that heavenly Jerusalem of which we now cherish the hope that we shall ere long be the inhabitants, our hearts must overflow with the liveliest and sweetest emotions, and the tears of contrition and trembling joy must burst from our eyes. O that the world were filled with such mourners! Then would peace come down from heaven and dwell in it, and the God of peace take up his abode in our hearts.

2. The next remarkable circumstance in the conduct of these liberated Jews, is *their anxiety lest they should mistake the way that is to lead them to Jerusalem*. “They shall ask the way to Zion.”

And is not this fearfulness, this spirit of enquiry, found in all who have fixed their heart on heaven? There was a time when they were destitute of all anxiety on the subject. They thought themselves sufficiently acquainted with the way to God. They deemed it broad and plain, and looked on him as an enthusiast, who bid them ask what they must do to be saved. But now all this self-confidence and imaginary security are come to an end. A conviction of their ignorance has forced itself on their minds. They see themselves to be far off from God, and unacquainted with the road which will lead them back to him. They know too that mistakes in religion are not trifling errors; that

there is but one way in which they can obtain the salvation they need, and that to seek it in any other way is to be for ever undone. Hence they are now as ready to ask for instruction, as they were before to repel it. The once despised Christian friend is sought; the long neglected Bible is searched; the throne of grace is approached; and that enlightening influence which was once spurned and contemned, is now supplicated with all the energy of the soul.

3. We may notice also *the decision* of these returning captives, the earnestness and resolution with which they seek the Lord. "They ask the way to Zion with their faces thitherward." This language evidently implies strong desire, fixed determination, a mind prepared to endure and to overcome every difficulty.

And no man ever arrived at the heavenly Zion, without possessing such a mind as this. Religion may occupy our attention, it may interest our feelings and excite our enquiries; this attention maybe close, these feelings deep, these enquiries sincere; but till Babylon is left, till a sinful world is forsaken, till sin is renounced, till the desire of salvation becomes the ruling principle of the soul, we must not, we dare not, regard ourselves as walking in the path of life, nor look on heaven as our home.

And yet, brethren, how many of us are contenting ourselves with a religion which leaves us worldly-minded, hesitating, and undecided! We ask the way to Zion, but we do not walk in it; or if at some seasons we appear to enter in at its strait gate, it is soon forsaken, and we are again hurrying along a more beloved and easier road. We seem to desire heaven, but we desire the vanities of the world more. We think that we love God, but when our love is put to the test, what is the result? We pour contempt on his favour; we trample on his laws; we write this name on our foreheads, "Lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God."

Were we really Christians, there would be an end of this indecision. We should see its danger, and we should see also its utter inconsistency with the nature of the Christian life. We should be convinced that we could not yield to it, even were it lawful to yield; that the riches of eternity not only demand, but absolutely engage, the warmest affections of every man who is acquainted with their worth.

Rest not satisfied then till religion is made your first concern, and the salvation of your soul your first pursuit; till, like Paul, you are willing to "suffer the loss of all things," that you may "win Christ and be found in him;" till, like Peter, you rejoice to be counted "worthy to suffer shame for his name;" till, like Moses, you esteem his reproach greater riches than all the treasures of the world.

Having thus far considered the prophet's description of these liberated

Israelites, let us pause, and enter on the work of self-examination. Can we trace in this picture a resemblance of ourselves? We profess to be seeking heaven; are we seeking it as the returning Jews sought Zion, with a tender heart, a broken and contrite spirit? Are we humble and earnest enquirers after God? Though fearful and trembling, are we yet resolute and decided Christians? Are we acting like travellers who are passing through a foreign country to a long wished for home?

If, brethren, you are men of this character, you are warranted to conclude that your bondage is come to an everlasting end, and that your Deliverer is guiding you by “the right way to a city of habitation.” Walk worthy then of “the high vocation wherewith you are called.” Cultivate the spirit which becomes a ransomed captive. And what is this spirit? A mind yielding to the influence of gloom and despondency? looking back on the past without thankfulness, and to the future without hope? No; it is a grateful and confiding spirit, a spirit of the liveliest joy that ever filled a glowing heart, or moved a praising tongue. It is true that they who are seeking heaven, begin to seek it weeping; but there is a blessedness which mingles itself with their sorrow as they go along, a feeling of security and hope which often changes their tears of penitence into tears of joy. The children of Israel wept as they left the confines of Babylon, but the prophets are constrained to employ the strongest language to express the greatness of their exultation. “They go out with joy, and are led forth with peace. The mountains and the hills break forth before them into singing, and all the trees of the field clap their hands.” And what is their own account of the matter? Read it in the hundred and twenty-sixth psalm. “When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing.” And with what was this joy accompanied? With praise; with an open acknowledgment of the power and goodness of their delivering God. “Then said they among the heathen, The Lord hath done great things for them.” “The Lord hath done great things for us,” is the answer of the rejoicing people, “whereof we are glad.” But in the midst of their gladness, we hear from them the voice of prayer. Though delivered from bondage, they are still at a distance from Jerusalem, and they beseech him who had begun, to complete their redemption. “Turn again our captivity, O Lord, as the streams in the south.”

Here then is your model, brethren. Strive to be conformed to it. Rejoice in your deliverance from sin and wretchedness, and be fervent in the praise of him who “remembered you in your low estate,” and “redeemed you from the hand of the enemy.” “O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good, and his mercy endureth for ever; for he hath broken the gates of brass, and cut the bars of iron in sunder.” You are thankful for earthly blessings, for health, for liberty, for peace: you would deem it sinful to receive even your daily food

without some slight acknowledgment of that bountiful Benefactor, who filleth the hungry with goodness; be thankful also for spiritual mercies. While the Preserver of your bodies is remembered, let not the Redeemer of your souls be forgotten, nor the wonders of grace which he has wrought for you, be buried in perpetual oblivion. When he formed you at first, it was that you might show forth his praise. When he bought you with the costly price of his own blood, he bought you that you might glorify him. When he delivered you out of the hand of your enemies, he sent you deliverance that you might serve him in holiness and righteousness all the days of your life. O give him then the poor service which he has so dearly purchased. Render him the worthless praise which he so highly values.

But you are called to watchfulness and prayer, as well as to joy and praise. You have left the kingdom of darkness, but you have not yet entered on “the inheritance of the saints in light.” The city of your God is still at a distance before you, and you must pass to it through an enemy’s country. Tribulation therefore must be expected, difficulties and dangers, temptations and conflicts. These things will be daily reminding you of your weakness, and causing you to deplore, with many bitter tears, the remaining earthliness and desperate wickedness of your hearts; but while they keep you humble, prayerful, and vigilant, let them not discourage you. He who has redeemed, is able to protect you, and has pledged himself never to leave nor forsake you in your pilgrimage; to uphold you by his power and guide you by his counsel, till you are walking the streets, beholding the glory, and sharing the glory, of the heavenly Zion. “Fear not,” is his language to each of the people whom he has set apart for himself, “for I have redeemed thee. I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee, and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee; when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned, neither shall the flame kindle upon thee; for I am the Lord thy God; the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour.” “The ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion, with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

How encouraging are these promises! How well calculated to strengthen every feeble knee, and raise every sinking heart! But while our own souls are refreshed by them, it is painful to reflect that many around us, and some perhaps who are exceedingly dear to us, neither enjoy nor desire the consolation they impart. It was the same among the Jews. When the messengers of Cyrus proclaimed liberty to their enslaved nation, thousands of them refused the offered freedom, and for the sake of the property and connections which they had acquired in Babylon, were content to give up for ever their country and their God. They were in fact indifferent about liberty, and consequently refused to incur the slightest loss or difficulty in order to obtain it. Who does

not pity the folly and condemn the baseness of their conduct? But how much more pitiable is that folly, which gives up the glories of an eternal heaven for the vanities of a fading world! and how much more worthy of condemnation the baseness, which prefers the shameful bondage of Satan to the service of God! Such a mind must indeed be fallen. It is however the very same mind which is now natural to man, which we ourselves once possessed and may still possess; the very mind which some of you, brethren, may have carried about with you all your life long, and to the debasing influence of which you may at this very hour be yielding. The scriptures tell you that you are by nature in a state of the most miserable subjection to sin; that it is fettering, withering, destroying you; and the evil dispositions you are daily manifesting, confirm the testimony; but no feeling of humiliation enters your mind, and you treat the liberty offered you in the gospel with contempt, or at best with cold indifference. The truth is, you know not that you are slaves. You love your, captivity. Its employments and pursuits are adapted to the desires of your corrupt hearts, and though they weary, and agitate, and at seasons torment you, not one sigh for freedom have you ever breathed, not a single real struggle for deliverance have you made.

It is this awful insensibility, which renders your situation so pitiable and dangerous. O be persuaded to strive against it! Force yourselves to enquire seriously and closely into your present condition and future prospects. Pray for the aid of that Holy Spirit who can rouse the most careless, and teach the most ignorant, and free the most enslaved. The language which this almighty Spirit addresses to you, is the same animating and gracious language that he addressed to Israel of old; "Awake, awake, put on thy strength, O Zion. Shake thyself from the dust; arise and sit down, O Jerusalem. Loose thyself from the bands of thy neck, O captive daughter of Zion. For thus saith the Lord, Ye have sold yourselves for nought, and ye shall be redeemed without money." This free and complete redemption is now urged on your acceptance. The way to the heavenly Jerusalem is set open before you. Avail yourselves then of this great salvation. Seek in Christ pardon and deliverance. Embrace his offered mercy. Come out from a perishing world. Take the Lord for your God.