

# SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

BY

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THE SIXTH EDITION.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR HAMILTON, ADAMS, AND CO.

PATERNOSTER-ROW.

1833.

## SERMON VII.

### THE WAY TO ZION.

ISAIAH XXXV. 8, 9, 10.

*And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called, The way of holiness. The unclean shall not pass over it, but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein. No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon; it shall not be found there: but the redeemed shall walk there. And 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.*

THE chapter of which these words are a part, testifies of Christ. The prophet, while foretelling in it the return of the Jews from their captivity in Babylon, is enabled to look forward to a more spiritual and much greater deliverance. With the eye of faith, he sees the kingdom of the Messiah established in the earth; and calling to his aid the most glowing and expressive figures that nature can supply, he describes the future blessedness of the church under his reign. His gospel is represented as making glad “the wilderness and the solitary place,” causing the desert to “rejoice and blossom as the rose,” and covering it with the verdure and towering cedars of Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon. He comes and publishes salvation, and the eyes of the blind are opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame man leaps as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sings. He pours out his Spirit from on high, and then waters break out in the wilderness and streams in the desert; the parched ground becomes a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water. And what follows? In the midst of this once dreary, but now rejoicing scene, he casts up a highway, he opens a new and blessed road, by which a multitude of the enslaved and perishing escape from their miseries, and are led to his kingdom and his throne.

Viewed therefore as a description of the method of salvation through the atoning sufferings, and justifying righteousness, and regenerating grace, of Christ, this prophecy calls upon us to consider, first, the travellers of whom it speaks; secondly, the way along which they are journeying; and, thirdly, the home to which it is leading them.

I. 1. *The travellers* who are described as walking in this way of holiness, were once journeying along a very different path. They are called “the redeemed,” and the term implies that *they were once in bondage*; at least, that they were in a state of degradation and wretchedness.

And this, brethren, is the natural condition of us all. We were created free and happy, free as the angels in heaven, and we might have been as blessed. We had but one Lord, and he was our own Father, the most exalted and gracious of lords, whom it was our highest honour to obey, and whose service was perfect freedom. We dwelt in his presence, and shared his friendship, and were crowned with the gifts of his love. But man forfeited his liberty and his honour. He entered into the service of sin, and sin threw its filthy chains around him, polluted his nature, debased his affections, made him the slave of its unclean prince, brought him under the power of death, and drew down on him the curse of God. It entirely ruined him, and with him all his race. Among the many millions of his offspring, not one has been found, except the holy Jesus, who has not been “carnal, sold under sin,” “serving divers lusts and pleasures,” “led captive by Satan at his will,” and made “subject to vanity” and death.

2. But these travellers to Zion *have been delivered from this state of bondage*; they have been redeemed. Their forsaken Lord sent to them in their misery a proclamation of freedom, and invited them to be reconciled to him, and regain the blessedness they had lost. They obeyed the call, and are free. The guilt of their transgressions has been blotted out, and the chain of their sins broken. They are again the servants of God, and no power on earth or in hell can ever retake them out of his hands. Not that their deliverance is at present complete. They have escaped from Babylon, but they are yet far off from Jerusalem. They are however walking in the path which leads to it, and they shall hold on their way, and “go from strength to strength,” till “every one of them in Zion appeareth before God.”

But how were these travellers redeemed? By an effort of their own power? Alas, brethren, we are no more able to purify our own hearts, or to avert from our heads the wrath of God, than the Ethiopian is able to “change his skin,” or the worm to throw from its body the rock which is crushing it. We owe our deliverance to another; and the prophet intimates to us in the text, the manner in which this deliverance was effected.

3. There are three ways of redeeming a captive—by exchange, by a forcible rescue, or by ransom. It is by the last of these, that the people of God are here said to have been liberated. They are called “the ransomed of the Lord;” *they were delivered from their bondage by a price paid by God himself for their redemption*. And what was this price? The scriptures tell us. “Ye were not redeemed,” says Saint Peter, “with corruptible things as silver and gold; but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.” And Saint Paul uses the same language. Speaking of Jesus, he says that “he gave himself a ransom” for sinners, and that “we have redemption through his blood.”

The meaning of this language is plain. By the sacrifice of himself upon the cross, Christ so magnified the law and honoured the justice of his Father, that mercy can now be extended to the sinner, and yet the veracity of the great Governor of the world remain unimpeached, and his glory unsullied. Leaving the habitation of his greatness, the eternal Son of Jehovah took on him the form of his ruined people, put himself in their place, and bore the vengeance which was ready to burst on their heads. "He made his own soul an offering for their sin," and "redeemed them from the curse of the law, being made a curse for them." Thus the demands of the law were fully satisfied, the ends of justice attained; and the criminal, on his appealing to this finished work of his Surety, is consequently pardoned. The captive is set free. God recovers his lost servant from the tyranny of sin and the arrest of justice, takes him again into his family, and, like the father of the returning prodigal, he rejoices over him and is glad, for this his son "was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found."

This, brethren, is the way, the only way, by which a sinner can obtain pardon and salvation. All the saints who are now rejoicing in glory, are indebted to the precious blood of Christ for every moment of their happiness; and all in future ages, who are taken from the world to be added to their number, will owe their redemption to the same crucified Saviour, and acknowledge him in their everlasting anthems as the only Redeemer of their souls.

The prophet speaks of this method of salvation in the text, and describes it under the figure of a highway or road, along which "the ransomed of the Lord" are travelling to Zion.

II. 1. In proceeding therefore to consider the description which he has given us of it, we may observe, first, that this path to heaven is a *safe* way, a way which not only leads the Christian pilgrim to his desired home, but in which he may walk without danger.

This is an important point for every traveller to ascertain. It is important in our own country, where there are no ferocious animals lying in wait to destroy; but it was peculiarly important in Judæa and the countries adjoining it. Many parts of these are said to have been infested with beasts of prey, which frequently rushed from their places of concealment upon the passing traveller, and rendered even the public roads exceedingly dangerous. Hence the prophet says of the way to heaven through Christ, that "no lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon; it shall not be found there."

Not that we are to conclude that the redeemed have no foes to combat, and no difficulties to surmount, in their course. Like the Israelites returning from Babylon, they have to pass through an enemy's country in their journey to Zion. Their way is beset with innumerable adversaries, and with many and great dangers. The world and the devil are continually striving to harass, plunder, and destroy them; and their own evil hearts are hourly tempting

them to wander and forsake their God. But he who has redeemed them, accompanies them in their pilgrimage; and though they are called on to struggle and fight, he gives them the victory; and renders their path as safe, as though there were no dangers near it, nor any to hurt or destroy. He strengthens them when they are weak, refreshes them when weary, and reclaims them when wandering. He so keeps them by the power of God, that among the multitudes who have sought to obtain access to the Father through him, not one has perished, or failed to obtain the salvation of his soul.

2. But what, it may be asked, if the way to heaven be thus safe? Is it a plain way? a road which can be easily found? The text tells us that it is exceedingly *plain*, so plain that “the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein.”

It is an unspeakable blessing, brethren, that the plan of redemption through a crucified Saviour requires no depth of learning nor great powers of mind to comprehend it. A child may become acquainted with it; and many of the most unlearned have so studied it, as to become “wise unto salvation.” They indeed who are not “wayfaring men,” who study the gospel as a subject of cold speculation merely, will never rightly understand it; after all their enquiries, it will baffle and perplex them; while he who in good earnest applies to God for instruction, and is really seeking salvation, though he be utterly destitute of all that the world calls wisdom, will discover a simplicity in the gospel, a suitableness and glory, which will astonish and delight his soul. Let a man once draw near the way of life, and the cloud which before appeared to bewilder it, is rolled away; “darkness is made light before him, and crooked things straight, and the rough places plain.” He may still be liable to err, and may actually fall into many mistakes; he may yet have much to learn; he may be brought into scenes of perplexity, into scenes in which the path of duty and safety may be hidden for a season from his view; but he has a Guide who is mindful of his ignorance, and can feel for him in his difficulties, and has pledged himself to uphold him in his goings, and to “lead him in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” “Behold I send an angel before thee,” is the language of his God, “to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared for thee. Beware of him, and obey his voice.”

3. But here another enquiry arises—Has not this plan of salvation a tendency to encourage licentiousness? And are not those who have embraced it, the practical opponents of good works? What is their moral character? Their character, brethren, is that of men who know that they have been “bought with a price” for this very purpose, that they should glorify God; of men who are actually become a purified and “peculiar people, zealous of good works.” The way in which they are seeking heaven, is a *pure*, a holy way. “It shall be called,” says the prophet, “the way of holiness. The unclean shall not pass

over it; but it shall be for those,” for those spoken of in the preceding part of the chapter, whose eyes have been opened to see the holiness of God, and whose tongues have been loosened to sing his praise, and whose souls have been cleansed in the fountain which he has opened for sin and uncleanness.

And what other men could be prevailed on to walk in such a way as this? From the beginning to the end of it, there is nothing to allure a trifling, or to gratify a sinful mind. Not one sensual gratification can be found in it. No gay and worldly society, no childish amusements, no song nor dance, enliven its borders; and as for “rioting and drunkenness, chambering and wantonness,” they are not so much as named along its path. Some indeed who profess to have entered it, have continued “lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God but they are either deceiving themselves or striving to deceive others. In either case, “destruction and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace have they not known.” It is true also that they who are really travelling along this road, were once ungodly; but no sooner did they enter in at its strait gate and tread on its sacred ground, than they began to hunger and thirst after righteousness, to cultivate purity of heart, and to emulate the holiness of the prophets, apostles, and saints, who have gone before them. Yea, brethren, while an ignorant world is accusing them of undervaluing good works and loving iniquity, there is not one among them, who would not consent to endure any tribulation or to make any sacrifice, so that he might be a partaker of the holiness of his Lord, be holy as he is holy, and perfect as he is perfect.

4. There is one question more still remaining to be answered. Though the road in which we are invited to travel be thus safe, plain, and pure, is it not dreary, and must we not, as we enter it, bid a long farewell to cheerfulness and joy? The prophet answers this enquiry also, and tells us that the way of salvation through a crucified Jesus is a *pleasant* way, a way of peculiar pleasantness and a path of never ending peace. “The ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion, with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads.”

There may probably be an allusion in this passage to the ancient custom of wearing crowns or chaplets of flowers in seasons of peculiar rejoicing; or it may perhaps refer to the practice of anointing the head with oil on festive occasions. In either case, its meaning is the same. It declares a truth which many of us are very unwilling to believe, that the self-denying, decided, and heavenly minded Christian, so far from being of all men the most miserable, is of all men the most happy, yea, the only happy man. It is true that he is represented in scripture as seeking heaven weeping, and arriving thither through a path of great tribulation; but then, in the midst of his tears, in the depth of his tribulation, he has a peace hid in his heart, which all the joys of the world could not purchase of him. Go to him, you who affect to pity and are so ready to censure him; ask him, when most afflicted and cast down, whether his religion has left him wretched and comfortless; and what is his

answer? He will tell you that he would not exchange his most sorrowful hour for your happiest day; that he has habitually within his afflicted soul consolations which are more than earthly, that he has sometimes a joy which is indeed divine; a joy rational and sober, and yet so elevated, that it brings into his heart a foretaste of heaven. The worldly minded indeed are not without their joys. You have your pleasures; but you need not be told how unsatisfying they are; with what a feeling of degradation they are often accompanied, and by how many pangs they are sometimes followed. And what if the pleasures of sin were great and unmixed? They would soon come to an end, for death and the grave destroy them for ever. But death cannot destroy the joy of the Christian. It is an everlasting joy, imperishable as his soul. The same song that he is singing now, his enraptured lips will soon pour forth in the courts of Zion before his God, and it shall be sweet as the song of angels, and lasting as eternity.

We might now attempt to follow the Christian pilgrim beyond the grave, and take a distant view of the home to which this blessed path is leading him; but reserving this for the subject of a future meditation, let us endeavour to impress upon our minds a sense of our own personal and intimate concern in the prophecy before us. We are the inhabitants of the wilderness of which it speaks. We are living in a world overspread with desolation, so entirely destitute of all spiritual supplies, that though millions have been for ages anxiously exploring it, it has never been able to satisfy the desires of one thirsty soul. But waters have at length broken out in this wilderness, and the most abundant streams are now flowing through it. God has sent his own Son from heaven to discover to us a way which affords to all who enter it, provision and safety, and which will conduct them in the end out of all their miseries to a kingdom of happiness. Are we walking in this way? Have we embraced the salvation disclosed to us in the gospel? There is reason to hope that some of us have embraced it. Though fearful and trembling, and weighed down at seasons with many sorrows, we are asking the way to Zion, and journeying towards it; we are daily seeking redemption through the blood of Jesus, and are manifesting by our conduct, that we count all things but loss so that we may “win Christ and be found in him.”

To such persons the text speaks the language of *encouragement*. Indeed the view of religion, which is here afforded them, is peculiarly encouraging. It may not, on the first view, appear to the humble penitent in this light. It tells him perhaps of a gladness which he has never experienced, and of a song which he has never sung. Like many other young disciples, he may attach an undue degree of importance to religious joy, and because he has never tasted, or has ceased to taste, the happiness which he thinks inseparably connected with true piety, he may be prone to deem himself an utter stranger

to the way of peace. Hence it often happens that he hears of the pleasures of religion with disquietude, rather than with delight. He can comprehend something of their nature; he listens with eagerness to the voice which speaks of them; and, as he listens, his heart is sometimes affected, and begins to glow with the liveliest desires and feelings; but in the midst of these rising emotions, he remembers that the joy of which he is hearing, has no place in his own breast, and the very scripture or sermon which was designed to animate, perplexes and dispirits him.

Now the text before us is well calculated to cheer such a mourner as this. It speaks to you of holiness, guidance, and safety; and it promises you these blessings at your entrance on the way to heaven. Believe this promise and confide in it. It speaks also of songs, of joy and gladness; but in what part of the road does it promise to crown you with these songs, with the highest consolations and richest joys of the gospel? Not till you are far advanced in your pilgrimage, and are drawing near the abode of your rest. The ransomed Israelites are repeatedly described in other places as setting out on their journey to Jerusalem weeping, as prosecuting it weeping, and not a word is said here of their songs till they are almost entering Zion. The lessons you have to learn are plain. Cease to make spiritual joy a test of your sincerity. Cease to be disquieted, if you are for a season destitute of it. Resolve to wait for it more patiently, and to seek it more earnestly in the only way in which it can be found, the way of holiness. Have you a broken and a contrite heart? Are you really seeking mercy as sinners, through the atoning blood of a crucified Saviour? Are you living a life of faith on the Son of God, praying to him, loving him, obeying him, bearing contentedly his cross? Then be not discouraged. "The path of the just is as the shining light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." "Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart." Your present conflicts and sorrows, your struggles with temptation, your humbling discoveries of your manifold corruptions, have all a blessedness connected with them. They are working out for you many an hour of happiness on this side of the grave, and "an exceeding and eternal weight of glory" beyond it. Only keep close to your redeeming Saviour; follow the Lord fully, and trust in him steadfastly; and you will grow in peace as you grow in years. The months, as they roll over you, will leave you happier than they find you, and every hour that flies will carry you nearer to your wished for home—to that Zion, in which no sorrowful sigh has ever yet been heaved nor tear shed; to that Christ, who is "all your salvation and all your desire to that God, in whose "presence is the fulness of joy," and at whose "right hand are pleasures for evermore."

But while the text is calculated to afford encouragement to some of us, it offers *direction* to all. Are we groaning under the slavery of sin, and enquiring with trembling solicitude how we may be saved from it? Are we

contemplating with fear the dangers which surround us, anxious to learn how creatures so weak may surmount difficulties so great, and triumph over enemies so mighty? Conscious of our extreme ignorance, are we seeking spiritual knowledge? Hating the defilement of sin, weary and ashamed of it, are we thirsting for holiness? Fainting under the calamities of life, and unable to bear its sorrows, are we looking around in our wretchedness for support and consolation? In short, is there a single evil which we wish to escape, or one real good which we desire to attain? The prophet directs us all to the same almighty Friend. He bids us seek in the gospel of Christ the mercies we need, and assures us that in that gospel we may obtain them. Let us believe and obey him. Instead of wearying ourselves in the pursuit of holiness and peace, by efforts which our own experience has proved to be fruitless as well as harassing; instead of spending our “money for that which is not bread,” and our “labour for that which satisfieth not;” let this be our first concern, to believe aright in the crucified Jesus, to make a real and spiritual application to him for the salvation which he shed his blood to procure. Let us begin with this. It may appear a strange way to the attainment of the blessing we desire, but it is the way of God’s appointment, and the only way in which we can succeed. The divine goodness can be exercised towards sinners only through the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus, and he who would be saved, cleansed, or refreshed, by its streams, must wait as a contrite and believing suppliant at his cross. It is there that the waters of salvation flow, and the fountain of life stands open. It is there that the guilty are pardoned and the ungodly sanctified. There the ignorant are instructed and the weak strengthened; there the tempted are enabled to conquer and the fearful to hope; there the weary and heavy laden first learn what is meant by rest; and there the afflicted first taste of a blessedness which elevates them above their sorrows, and causes them to “forget their poverty and remember their misery no more.”