

# SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

BY

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## SERMON VIII.

### THE HEAVENLY ZION.

ISAIAH XXXV. 10.

*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.*

THESE rejoicing travellers were once miserable captives, enslaved by sin and in bondage to Satan. But Christ, by paying for them the ransom of his blood, set the prisoners free, and made them the beloved children of God and the heirs of heaven.

The method of salvation to which they owe their deliverance, is spoken of in the verses preceding the text as a highway, a plain and elevated road opened in the midst of a desolate wilderness, and affording to all who enter it, security and peace. It is not however the safety nor the pleasantness of a path, which will induce a traveller to walk in it. It must conduct him to the place at which he wishes to arrive. The prophet therefore carries on the metaphor farther, and describes this highway as leading to a most blessed home; to a mountain where sorrow and sighing are unknown, and to a city in which joy and gladness ever reign.

Zion, the place he alludes to in the text as the future habitation of the redeemed, is a hill on which a part of Jerusalem was built, and where the temple of Jehovah stood. Hence it is often used in the scriptures to signify the church; and it may undoubtedly be thus understood in the passage before us. To return to Zion, implies therefore, in the first instance, to be admitted into the visible church of God, and to a full participation of all its privileges. But it implies also much more. It directs our eyes upward to that holy hill on which the heavenly Jerusalem is built, “the city of the living God.” Of this unseen residence of the just the earthly Zion was a type; and we may find it a profitable subject of meditation to trace, first, the resemblance, and, secondly, the contrast between them.

I. 1. The hill of Zion was *the peculiar residence of God*. There his temple was erected, and there the mercy-seat, the visible symbol of his presence, stood. There he met his beloved people, communed with them, and blessed them. “In Judah is God known,” says the psalmist; “in Salem also is his tabernacle, and his dwelling place in Zion.”

In heaven also the Almighty has a temple, and “the way of holiness” leads to it. It brings those who once dwelt in this dreary wilderness, into the

kingdom of God; and not into his kingdom only; it carries them into the immediate presence of Jehovah, places them before his throne, where they see him as he is, and hold the most free, intimate, and uninterrupted intercourse with him, and enter into his joy, and are made partakers of his greatness. Even here at a distance from heaven, while “beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord,” they “are changed into the same image from glory to glory;” but there they shall “see him no more through a glass darkly, but face to face and have so much of the splendour of his presence reflected on them, as to shine like the brightness of the firmament and as the stars for ever and ever.

If we enquire by what means the redeemed obtain admission into this mansion of blessedness, the apostle tells us. “We have boldness,” he says, “to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which he hath consecrated for us through the veil, that is to say, his flesh.” Saint John also speaks the same language. Referring to that great multitude which he beheld clothed with white robes in glory, “These are they,” he says, “which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple.”

2. The Jews were taught to regard their sacred mountain as *the source of all their blessings*. When salvation was promised them, it was to come “out of Zion and when they were to be strengthened and blessed, “the Lord out of Zion” was to strengthen and bless them. Hence we find Daniel turning towards Jerusalem when he prayed in Babylon, and Jonah looking towards the holy temple of his God when he cried amidst the waves for deliverance.

And what real happiness is there, which comes not from above? If we could look through the universe, and search every rejoicing heart among its innumerable worlds, not a moment’s blessedness could be found, which had not its origin in heaven. Means indeed are employed in imparting mercies and consolations to us, and we are often tempted to consider these means as the chief, if not the only source of our comforts; but if we viewed them aright, we should regard them only as channels through which it has pleased God to communicate his benefits, and which, were he to withhold his hand, would lose all their power to minister to our necessities. The great fountain is above; and when we have reached the throne of Jehovah, we shall receive our happiness immediately from him, and wonder that we should ever have depended for it on any creatures.

3. Zion also was *the place in which the people of the Lord assembled*. Three times in the year they came up to it from every part of the land, and formed one worshipping and praising assembly in its temple. “Thither the tribes went up, the tribes of the Lord, unto the testimony of Israel, to give thanks unto the name of the Lord.” The apostle therefore, when speaking of the spiritual Zion, fails not to remind his brethren of the society into which

they would be received there. “Ye are come unto mount Zion,” he says, “and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem; and to an innumerable company of angels; to the general assembly and church of the first-born which are written in heaven; and to God, the Judge of all; and to the spirits of just men made perfect; and to Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant.”

And who can describe the blessedness which will flow from fellowship with such a company as this? Our communion with the Saviour now is sweeter than we can find words to express. Unseen and sometimes unexpected, he holds intercourse with our spirits; and our hearts burn within us as he draws near to our souls. But in heaven we shall behold his face, and talk with him as a man talks with his friend. We shall sit at the feet of that very Jesus who became a man of sorrows for our sakes; and hear the same voice pronounce us blessed, which chased away the fears of the mourning, disciples at Jerusalem, and called the sleeping Lazarus from the dust at Bethany. The angels too will welcome us to their holy assembly; and there also we shall behold all the patriarchs and prophets of whom we have heard and read; the glorious company of the apostles, and the noble army of martyrs; all the redeemed out of every kindred, nation, and language, and among them the much loved friends whom death has now removed from our sight; the friends with whom we once prayed and suffered, praised and rejoiced, and who are now waiting for the hour which shall make us once more the inhabitants of the same world, and sharers in the same bliss. There the parent shall again behold the face of his long lost child, and there the child shall again rejoice in the smiles of his parent. There the husband shall once more bless the wife of his youth, and there brothers and sisters, who now lie silent together in the same grave, shall sit on the same throne, and reign in the same endless life.

The prospect of this re-union is soothing, and it ought to be profitable also. It is calculated to sweeten and cement our friendships, to make us deeply anxious for the welfare of each other's souls, to alleviate our grief when those whom we love go to their rest, and to excite us to long for heaven more ardently and seek it more earnestly. Let us view it as the general assembly of the saints, and be anxious to become more meet for their undefiled inheritance in light.

II. But it is in vain, brethren, that we endeavour to comprehend the glory and blessedness of the future habitation of the redeemed. The earthly Jerusalem was a splendid city; “beautiful for situation, and the joy of the whole earth, was mount Zion;” but even in the height of her greatness, when the glory of the Lord rested on her tabernacle, when peace was within her walls and prosperity within her palaces, she afforded but a poor emblem of the heavenly city. At the time however, to which the words of the prophet primarily relate, *the contrast* was peculiarly striking. The Zion to which the

liberated Jews so joyfully returned, was “a wilderness, and Jerusalem a desolation.” “The holy and beautiful house, where their fathers worshipped, was burnt up with fire, and all their pleasant things were laid waste.” And even when they had succeeded, after years of toil and difficulty, in again raising its walls, their joy was embittered by a remembrance of the superior glory of their former temple, and their peace was incessantly disturbed by the attacks of their enemies. And where is Jerusalem now? Where is its temple? Not a stone remains of either, which has not been cast down. And where are the people who founded them, and dwelt in them, and loved them so well? Wandering as outcasts on the face of the earth, scorned by men and rejected by God. As for their country, it is desolate; “strangers devour it in their presence, and it is desolate as overthrown by strangers.”

The heavenly Zion however knows no destruction and fears no change. It is “a city which hath foundations;” an abiding city; a city which the force of a universe could not shake, nor the rolling ages of eternity impair. Its walls are not lying in ruins, waiting to be rebuilt by the sinners whom sovereign mercy leads to them. “Its builder and maker is God.” Before the foundation of the world was laid, he prepared and adorned it for his people; and to secure to them its blessedness and honours, his eternal Son has entered it as their representative, and taken possession of it in their behalf; and he will soon come again with glory to take them to himself, and to lead them to the place he has prepared for them. Then indeed shall they “obtain joy and gladness;” a happiness which will allow them to shed no tears at the remembrance of the bliss that was lost in paradise, but cause sorrow and sighing to flee away for ever. Their joy shall be everlasting, without interruption, mixture, or end; for no enemies can come near to disturb the city where they dwell. No changes or commotions are dreaded, no spectacles of woe are ever seen, within its walls. No evil tidings are heard there, no fears known. “Look upon Zion,” says the prophet, “the city of our solemnities.” “Thine eyes shall see Jerusalem a quiet habitation, a tabernacle that shall not be taken down; not one of the stakes thereof shall ever be removed, neither shall any of the cords thereof be broken. But there the glorious Lord will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams, wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby.” Hear also the testimony of one who was admitted to a nearer view of its glories. “And I John saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven, saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away.”

Such, brethren, is the blessed home to which Christ is leading his redeemed people; and if such is their future habitation, *how exceedingly glorious is their character and condition!*

It is true that but little of their glory is visible here, for it has pleased God that most of them should be numbered among the mean and despised; but when we view them as “the ransomed of the Lord” and as travellers to Zion, when we look back on the wonders of mercy which have been wrought for their deliverance, and stretch our view forward to that splendid inheritance which is prepared for them in eternity, there is something unspeakably grand in their state and character; a grandeur which casts a shade on all the greatness of the world, and elevates the soul above its vanities. Men may pour contempt on the humble Christian, but the mercies of redemption have invested him with a dignity which constrains the angels of God to regard him with wonder, and causes the eternal Jehovah himself to delight in him as the most splendid monument of his power and grace.

*And how glorious also will be the future condition of the Christian church!*

The prophecy before us yet waits to be fully accomplished. Though the sound of the gospel has already gladdened a part of our earth, there is yet many a wilderness where its joyful tidings have never been heard, and many a desert which has brought forth no fruits of righteousness to the glory of God. Many gentile nations still resemble “the parched ground and the habitation of dragons,” and the children of Israel and Judah are still far off from the spiritual Zion. But while we contemplate the scene of desolation around us, it is cheering to remember that ere long the desert shall rejoice and the wilderness be glad; that the heathen shall hear the gospel, and be enriched by its blessings; that the outcasts of Israel shall again be gathered into the church of God, be planted as trees of righteousness in the garden of the Lord, and “blossom, and bud, and fill the face of the world with fruit.” “It shall come to pass in the last days,” says the prophet, “that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths; for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.”

Glorious indeed will be the state of the church in the latter days; but how much more glorious still in that day, when this prediction shall receive its final accomplishment; when the everlasting doors of heaven shall be opened, and all “the ransomed of the Lord” shall enter, with their triumphant Deliverer, into the city of God! Even now, while following him through a path of

tribulation and clothed in the polluted garments of the flesh, they are honourable and blessed; what then will be their gladness, when he leads them into his glory! and what their honour, when he clothes them in the robes of immortality, and presents them faultless before the throne of his Father with exceeding joy!

Looking forward to such a glory as his own, *how patient and diligent ought the Christian to be!* how submissive under his present troubles! how full of hope in the contemplation of his future prospects! how exceedingly watchful lest he should turn back and lose so great salvation! Other travellers have their thoughts constantly fixed on their home; and it is the hope of reaching it, which enables them to bear all the difficulties of their way so contentedly, and to think so lightly of its many labours. And when the Christian's eyes are fixed on heaven, no pilgrim can be more joyful than he, none more diligent. The world assumes a new appearance. He does not love it more, but the anticipation of his home enables him to enjoy its blessings more thankfully, and to be less harassed by its cares. Like the rays of the sun shining on a road which clouds had darkened, the hope of heaven brightens every scene around him, and fills him with gratitude and praise.

It is as much our interest, brethren, as it is our duty, to cultivate this heavenly spirit. Our happiness in this world must, in a great measure, be derived from the prospect of that glory which we shall inherit in the next; and until we have learnt to live in the habitual contemplation of this glory, we shall be more frequently uttering the language of despondency, than singing the songs of Zion. Hope is the constant companion of every rejoicing pilgrim, and under her influence he sings and presses forward, when others mourn and faint. Strive then to “abound in hope through the power of the Holy Ghost.” Meditate much on heaven, and on the stability of that covenant which ensures the possession of it to those whom Christ has ransomed. Endeavour to view every thing around you in connection with it. Live as the heirs of it. “Be diligent,” that when the Deliverer shall come out of Sion to carry his redeemed home, “you may be found of him in peace, without spot and blameless,” and dwell for ever in his holy hill and abide in his tabernacle.

The text suggests to us another reflection—*How anxiously ought every man to enquire in what way he is seeking heaven!*

Some of us appear to think that it is not a matter of much importance in what way we seek it; that it is a kingdom which may be approached by many roads, and which few will fail to reach. But is this the language of the Bible? No language can be more different. “Strait is the gate,” says Christ, “and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.” And as though this declaration were not sufficiently alarming, he adds to it another still more awful; “Strive to enter in at the strait gate, for many I say unto you shall seek to enter in, and shall not be able.” And why shall they

not be able? Because they have not sought admission in the appointed way. In what way then are you seeking it? Are you walking in that highway to Zion discovered to sinners in the gospel, or are you turning aside into some easier and more frequented road? Is salvation by grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, the only salvation you desire? Is your religion making you holy; delivering you from the bondage of sin, from the love and fear of the world; and elevating your affections to high and heavenly things? Is your soul thirsting for God, longing to be where he is reigning in his majesty, and panting for those exalted employments and pleasures which are at his right hand?

This is the religion, brethren, which will lead a sinner to heaven, and make him happy when he arrives there. Has the Holy Spirit implanted it in your breasts? The question is fearfully important. May you give no sleep to your eyes nor slumber to your eyelids, till you have seriously and closely considered it. It is an awful fact that, through the exceeding deceitfulness of our hearts, we are most liable to err in that matter, in which error is the most ruinous. Here it is absolutely fatal. To mistake the way to heaven is to sink into hell. "There is a way," the scripture says, "which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death." There is however another truth as cheering as this is appalling. Though we are told of only one way to heaven, yet that, we are assured, is a way which all who are willing, may enter. He who opened it at so costly a price, stands at its entrance, and invites all the sinful, the wretched, and perishing, to walk in it, and share its safety and happiness. While he calls them from all other ways by telling them that no man can come unto the Father but by him, he encourages them to draw near to him in this by the assurance, that "whosoever cometh unto him shall in no wise be cast out." "Stand ye in the ways then, and see, and ask for the old paths, and where is the good way, and walk therein; and ye shall find rest for your souls;" a peaceful rest in the house of your pilgrimage, and a glorious and eternal rest in the habitation of your God.