

SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

BY

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SERMON XI.

THE REPENTANCE OF PETER.

ST. LUKE xxii. 60, 61, 62.

And immediately, while he yet spake, the cock crew. And the Lord turned and looked upon Peter, and Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said unto him. Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And Peter went out, and wept bitterly.

WE have in the fall and restoration of the apostle Peter, a sad instance of human frailty, and a most affecting proof of the divine mercy. The one is recorded to warn, the other to encourage us. While the one bids the most confident fear, the other offers consolation to the most sorrowful and hope to the most desponding.

The words of the text afford us a description of the repentance by which this apostle was recovered from his fallen state; and they direct us to consider, first, the means by which it was produced; secondly, the sorrow which accompanied it; and, thirdly, the effects by which it was followed.

I. 1. The repentance of Peter is ascribed, in the first instance, to *a circumstance apparently unimportant.*

When David sinned against the Lord, a prophet was commissioned to call him to repentance. An angel is sent down from heaven to reprove the transgressing Balaam, and winds and storms are employed to remind the disobedient Jonah of his guilt. But when his beloved disciple has forsaken and denied him, the Saviour, strong in the omnipotence of his own arm, calls not to his aid the ministry of a prophet or an angel, nor the terrors of a tempest, but accomplishes his work of mercy as promptly and as effectually by the mere crowing of a cock; by means which plainly declare that he has power to make "all things work together for good to them that love" him, and can render the most feeble instruments effectual to restore their souls. At his command, the voice of a bird is made to preach repentance to Peter; and many a sinner has been taught to weep and pray by events which have appeared as accidental and trifling.

How observant then ought we to be of all which surrounds or befalls us; and how anxious to obtain from it instruction in righteousness! How earnest should we be in the use of means, when we see that God seldom works without them; and how little trust ought we to place in them, when we remember that they owe all their efficacy to the operation of his hand!

2. To his agency the repentance of Peter must be traced, for the text ascribes it, secondly, to *the interposition of Christ.* Without this, the warning voice of the cock would have been heard in vain; nay, it was heard in vain,

for, as Saint Mark informs us, it had reached the disciple's ear immediately after his first denial of his Master, and, instead of interrupting him in his wickedness, had suffered him to repeat and aggravate his crime. It was the look of Christ which gave it, at the second time, all its power, and enabled it to silence his oaths, to penetrate into his inmost soul, and to arouse the conscience which was slumbering there. "The Lord turned and looked upon Peter," and then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, and "went out and wept."

And what, brethren, are all the warnings of Providence, however signal or frequent, when unaccompanied by the grace of God? They are powerless as "sounding brass," and no more able to convert the soul than "a tinkling cymbal." But what are they when attended with this grace? The "quick and powerful" weapons of the living God; "sharper than any two-edged sword; piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit;" startling the sinner in his midnight slumbers, and giving life and feeling to the dead. He only who formed the heart at first, can renew it again to repentance. He only can keep alive the penitence to which his own grace has given birth, and re-animate it when weakened or destroyed.

3. But what followed the look which the compassionate Saviour directed towards his fallen apostle? It was a look of the mildest reproof and of the tenderest pity, but it was more powerful than the lightning's flash. Piercing his heart, it produced there that *serious reflection* from which his contrition sprung. It forced memory to do its work, to bring before his mind the pride he had manifested, the warnings he had slighted, the vows he had broken, the goodness he had abused, and the crimes he had committed. The sinner "came to himself." "He remembered the word of the Lord," and as he thought thereon, he wept.

And this is the usual method in which repentance is produced and renewed in the soul. It is preceded by thoughtfulness, by reflection. Indeed one of the original words which the Holy Spirit has employed to describe it, signifies to think of an action or event that is past, with a deep and anxious concern.

Sin quiets the conscience, and paralyzes all the powers of the mind. It causes the declarations of God to be forgotten, and the dispensations of his providence to pass unheeded. It fills the soul with the concerns of the present scene, and makes it as regardless of the invisible world, as though there were no happiness there which it could lose, no misery which it could inherit. But the Lord does not suffer those who are truly his, to remain for ever in this insensible state. He calls them out of it, and often by means which seem but little calculated to lead to so gracious an end. Some passing event, some apparently casual circumstance which makes no impression on others, arrests their attention, and assumes the overpowering importance of a messenger of God. It fastens itself on their minds, awakening there a long train of reflections, recalling to their memory periods and events in their history which

they had long ceased to think of, and giving rise to feelings which seemed to have perished for ever. The seed which had lain buried in the earth, now springs up, and buds, and brings forth its fruit. The declarations of scripture, the exhortations of ministers, the admonitions of friends, the convictions of conscience, all the means of grace which had been forgotten or despised, are now brought with freshness and power into the mind, and affect and agitate it. The once thoughtless sinner pauses, trembles, and prays. The cold-hearted backslider remembers from whence he is fallen, and repents. The declining Christian shakes himself from the dust, and, in the midst of contrition and tears, recovers the love and vigour which he seemed to have lost.

II. But the transition from a state of sin to a state of grace, from impenitence to contrition, from spiritual deadness to spiritual fervour, though cheered by many pleasurable feelings, is never wholly unattended with sorrow. Peter was brought to repentance, but there was an anguish of spirit accompanying his restoration, which the evangelist does not and could not describe. He tells us however how it was manifested? "Peter went out and wept bitterly."

1. His sorrow was therefore of a *softening* nature. "He wept." It was not that horror of soul, which has its origin solely in fear, and leaves the heart as hard as it finds it. It was the sorrow which springs from love, and fills the breast with the tenderest emotions, while it disquiets and humbles it. Not that tears are certain signs of real penitence, for they are often the effects of a natural tenderness, of mortified pride, or of bodily weakness, rather than of spiritual contrition. The profane Esau "lifted up his voice and wept" when suffering under the consequences of his folly, and even in hell there is "weeping and wailing." But though there may be tears without penitence, yet there is no real penitence where these are always wanting. He who has never yet wept for sin, has never felt its bitterness. The Christian is described as bemoaning himself, as sowing in tears, as turning to the Lord with mourning, as going on his way to Zion weeping; and no man must imagine himself possessed of the Christian's contrite spirit, whose sighs are not often entering into the ears of the Lord, and whose tears are not treasured up in his vials.

2. But the sorrow of Peter was *acute*, as well as softening. He not only wept, but he wept "bitterly." And bitterly does every sinner weep, who really bewails his transgressions. The sorrow connected with true repentance is not only sincere, it is deep and pungent. It not only enters into the heart, but it penetrates into its inmost recesses, and there lives and reigns. It not only causes the tear to flow, but, in the strong language of scripture, it "afflicts the soul," cutting and rending it. It causes the transgressor to feel the misery of sin as he confesses it, and to smite on the breast as he asks for mercy; to take up and to understand this declaration of the prophet, "The spirit of a man will sustain his infirmity, but a wounded spirit who can bear?" Nay, it is compared to the most acute and bitter sorrow, that can find a place in the human breast; to the sorrow which chills the heart and racks the soul of a parent, as

he mourns the loss of a son, of an only son, and him a first-born; such lamentation as Sarah would have made over the grave of Isaac, such anguish as Hannah would have cherished at the death of Samuel, the child of her many tears and strong desires. When the Spirit of grace is poured out on Jerusalem, we are told that “they shall look on him whom they have pierced, and mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son; and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his first-born. In that day there shall be a great mourning in Jerusalem, as the mourning of Hadadrimmon in the valley of Megiddon.”

3. The sorrow of Peter was, further, a *secret* sorrow; a grief which sought retirement. “He went out” when he wept. Not that he was now afraid to acknowledge Christ, or unwilling to condemn himself for the crime which he had committed; but, like penitent Ephraim, “he was ashamed, yea, even confounded and he sought where to give vent to his sorrow unseen, and to implore undisturbed that mercy which he so greatly needed.

And every real penitent is often “sitting alone.” Flying from scenes of vanity which he once loved, and from society which his folly once enlivened, he retires to his chamber and his closet, and there, when he has shut his door, he communes with his heart, prays to his offended Father, and weeps. He is not indeed unwilling to tell his Christian friends of his spiritual troubles, nor anxious to conceal from them his shame; but there are seasons when he feels so overpowering a sense of his sinfulness, so tender and deep a sorrow, that the presence of the dearest friend cannot be borne, and the soul must be left alone with its God. Thus “the publican stood afar off,” when he prayed in the temple; and thus, in the latter days, the penitent Jews will mourn, every family apart and every member of it in secret.

Here then is a lesson for those whose consciences are awakened, and whose hearts are softened. Love retirement. Fly from a seducing world. Converse much with yourselves. The tears of contrition are seldom shed in a crowd, and the deepest workings of penitence must be weakened and eventually stifled in the company of the light-hearted, the worldly, and the vain.

III. We have thus traced the means by which the repentance of Peter was wrought, and we find it ascribed to a circumstance apparently unimportant, to the interposition of Christ, and to the influence of reflection. We have considered also the sorrow which accompanied it, and have seen that it was softening, acute, and secret. Let us now follow the apostle beyond the scene of his humiliation, and enquire *what effects his repentance afterwards produced.*

1. True repentance is invariably followed by some effects, and such as are visible and permanent. It produced in Peter *an increasing love for his Lord.*

Scarcely was Jesus risen, when, mindful of his sorrowful disciples, he sent his angel to announce to them the glad tidings of his triumph; and, by commanding these tidings to be delivered particularly to Peter, he assured

him that notwithstanding his base disowning of him, he still regarded him as his apostle and friend. This assurance of his Redeemer's love did not however elate the fallen disciple. It did not restore his former self-confidence, but it restored his peace, and added fresh warmth and strength to the affection which glowed in his breast. With what eager haste did he run to the forsaken sepulchre! The beloved John paused when he reached it, and hesitated before he entered it; but Peter had at this time no heart to examine and calculate. He entered at once into the conquered grave, that he might behold there the memorials of his Master's triumph.

And look at him again on the sea of Tiberias. "It is the Lord," said John as he beheld the Saviour standing on the shore, and the sound had no sooner reached his ears, than the ardent Peter, impatient of delay, sprang into the sea and hastened to the shore. And who can describe the scene which followed? Who can enter into the feelings which melted the heart of the disciple as he prostrated himself at his Master's feet? And who can describe the overflowing love and tenderness of that Master's heart? None but those who have tasted of his pardoning mercy, and enjoyed, while lying low in the dust, the sweet and elevating outpourings of his grace.

2. His repentance was followed also by *greater zeal and boldness in the service of Christ*.

Look at him, brethren, in the hall of Ananias, and behold there a cowardly, trembling apostate. There the tempter triumphed in the weakness and shame of his victim, for that was "his hour and the power of darkness." But look at him after the hand of God had humbled him, and behold a noble and undaunted apostle, asserting in the streets of Jerusalem the divinity of him whom but a short time before he had feared to own as his friend; standing foremost among his brethren to declare his greatness, and to reprove those who had shed his blood; led from tribunal to tribunal, and driven from country to country; everywhere persecuted for the sake of Christ, and everywhere "rejoicing that he was counted worthy to suffer shame for his name." And in the midst of all this invincible boldness, behold this very apostle remembering the sin which had disgraced him; going to prison and to judgment, to the torture and the cross, mingling the tears of penitence with the songs of praise. This was indeed a triumph for the gospel. Here a mighty God glorified his grace, brought good out of evil, forced the fall of his servant to magnify the power which raised him up again, and testified that his mighty arm can take the reed, shivering before every breath that blows, and make it firm as a mountain, standing unmoved before the most impetuous winds, and lifting up its head to heaven uninjured by the wildest storms.

The pardoned transgressor then can be at no loss to discover what these things were designed to teach him. They call upon him to cherish the most fervent love for his Saviour, and to fear neither suffering nor shame in his service. To talk of our convictions and assurance, of the tears we have shed

and the grace we have experienced, while our life manifests no love for our Redeemer and our tongue is silent in his praise, is idle; it is worse; it is hypocritical and sinful. If we, like Peter, are mourning in secret over our iniquity and rejoicing in a sense of forgiveness, like him we are boldly confessing Christ in public, honouring him among those who despise him, and deeming it our highest glory to bear his reproach. Our affection is in some measure proportioned to the mercy we have received. At any rate, it is sincere, active, constraining. Whatever the religion of others may be, ours cannot be lukewarm. There is an energy in it, a decision, a savour. The remembrance of our guilt, and of the grace which pardoned it, and of the blood which purchased this grace, will be ever rising within us; exciting the most lively thankfulness, and prompting to the most devoted obedience. We shall be, in short, what Peter was, liable to many infirmities, but acting, in the midst of them all, like men to whom a dying Saviour is precious, and who “count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus their Lord.”

The lesson which this display of mercy addresses to *the penitent sinner*, is equally obvious. No one can fail to perceive that it was designed to encourage him, to pour balm into his wounded conscience, and the oil of joy into his broken heart. It bids him banish the despair which is tormenting him, and welcome that mercy which is waiting to refresh him. It shows him that very Jesus who is now seated on the throne of the universe and invested there with infinite power to save, trembling at the prospect of his own sufferings, and yet pausing to exercise his compassion; troubled with a foretaste of his mysterious agonies, and yet mindful of a faithless servant, unwilling to die till he had saved him from destruction, and eager, when risen again, to restore peace to his soul.

And could he, brethren, have left you in his dying hour a stronger proof of the tenderness of his mercy? Could you even desire a more encouraging assurance of the boundless extent of his love? He knew that you would need “strong consolation,” and here he has provided it for you. Rejoice in it, and be thankful. Your case may indeed be peculiarly distressing. Sins of no common heinousness may have sunk you into a depth of misery, from which hope seems for ever excluded. But your sins are not more aggravated than the crimes of Peter, nor is your anguish more bitter. And what though they were? Who showed you the greatness of your guilt? Who opened your eyes to perceive your danger? Who singled you out from among a thoughtless crowd, and taught you to reflect, and weep, and pray? The same almighty Saviour who humbled and pardoned his cursing disciple. The same eye that brought him to repentance, is now fixed on you. The same hand that snatched him from perishing, is already stretched out in your behalf. Your great and continual sorrow of heart is a token of the Lord’s special love. It is a proof that though he may have spoken against you as he spake against Ephraim, he earnestly remembers you still, that his bowels are troubled for you, that he is even now preparing a blessing for every sigh that you heave, a comfort for

every tear. In his own good time he will surely have mercy upon you; and in order to the immediate outpouring of this mercy, all he requires of you is to apply to that blood which he so freely shed for your sakes, and to believe in its efficacy; to give credit to his promises, and to rely on his word.

But what is the language of the text to *the impenitent*? It tells them that by resisting the strivings of conscience and stifling its convictions, they are sinning against their own souls, and rejecting the only means which can restore them to the happiness they have lost. Heart-felt sorrow for sin is not opposed to happiness. The example of Peter shows us, on the contrary, that it is the appointed means of leading the wandering sufferer back to the source of all consolation. The tears of penitence are not tears of unmingled bitterness. There is a joy connected with them, which is as satisfying and exalting, as it is purifying and humbling. God himself has pronounced the sorrow of the poor in spirit blessed, and he has not blessed it in vain. His people taste its sweetness. Their happiest hours are those which are spent in the exercise of penitence and faith, and while these graces are in lively exercise, they are ready to deem themselves as blest as the inhabitants of heaven.

But present happiness is not the only fruit of godly repentance. Heaven is connected with it, an eternity of uninterrupted blessedness. "They who sow in tears," are destined "to reap in joy." They who now mourn in Zion, are the appointed inheritors of the heavenly city, and the future companions of those who are now walking in its streets.

Who then will despise so rich a gift, so dearly purchased, so freely offered? Who will not rather seek it with all the energy of his soul at the throne of his exalted Lord? To be subdued with godly sorrow is to be an accepted child of God, a jewel in the Saviour's crown, an heir of glory. To die with the heart unhumbled is to enter a world of darkness, to dwell for ever in a kingdom of proud rebellion and never ending anguish. "Humble yourselves" therefore, brethren, "under the mighty hand of God." Tremble at his word. Grieve not his Holy Spirit. Admit him into your hearts, that he may soften them. Welcome his awakening influence. Desire nothing more than a broken and a contrite spirit. Dread nothing so much as a proud and hardened heart.