

SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

BY

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SERMON XV.

THE EXHORTATION AND PROMISES OF GOD TO THE AFFLICTED.

ISAIAH xliii. 1, 2, 3.

Thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel; Fear not, 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.

THESE cheering words were addressed by God to his peculiar people the Jews; but God has a peculiar people now, and all who are partakers of their faith and love, may consider this scripture as designed for themselves, as written for the very purpose of imparting comfort and strength to their troubled hearts. The subjects of consideration which it suggests to us, are these four—the afflictions to which the people of God are liable; the exhortation addressed to them in the prospect of these afflictions; the promises by which it is strengthened; and the arguments by which it is enforced.

I. Compared with the miseries which they have deserved, or with the weight of glory which is laid up for them in heaven, *the afflictions of the people of God* are light; but in other points of view, they often appear sharp and heavy.

The text intimates that they may be *great*. They may pass through waters, yea, through rivers; through calamities which seem as deep and overwhelming as rapid torrents, and as likely to destroy them.

Their troubles too may be greatly *diversified*. They may be in the waters today and may have deliverance, but tomorrow they may be called on to walk through the fire and the flame: to endure trials which are unexpected and strange, different in their nature from any they have yet experienced, and far more severe and bitter.

The text implies also that these afflictions are *certain*; that they not only may come, but will come. It speaks of them as things of course. It represents the overflowing river and the raging flame as standing directly in the Christian's path in his road to heaven; and tells him that before he can arrive there, he must pass through the one and walk through the other.

We see then our calling, brethren. We see what we take as our present inheritance when we join ourselves in a covenant to the Lord. We are promised not only grace and glory, but afflictions, great afflictions, diversified afflictions, certain and unavoidable afflictions. There is no way to Canaan, but through a howling wilderness. There is no way to heaven, but through a path of tribulation.

II. Under such circumstances, how seasonable and encouraging is *the exhortation* which is here addressed to us! It is short and simple, but it is sufficient to show us that the Lord who created us, is aware of the situation in which we are placed, and of the difficulties and dangers with which we are encompassed; that he enters into our troubles, yea, into our misgivings and fears.

The power and greatness of him from whom it proceeds, gives to this exhortation a force which it would not otherwise possess. It is God who says to his afflicted people, “Fear not the great God; the eternal God; the God who created and formed us; the God who has the earth for his footstool and heaven for his throne; the only Being in the universe who can help and bless a sinner, and the only Being whom a sinner has cause to fear.

Now this command plainly implies that the natural tendency of our trials is to excite fear. It might not be so if we were strong and sinless beings, but this is not our state or character. We are weak and guilty beings, likely to be dispirited by the slightest tribulation and to be overwhelmed by the weakest; as liable to be “crushed before the moth,” as to be destroyed by the falling mountain. There is consequently a fear of afflictions, which is a natural and by no means a sinful passion; a fear which leads us to avoid them, if the will of God will allow us to avoid them, and if not, to receive them with circumspection and prayer; to be aware of the dangers and temptations with which they are invariably accompanied, and of our utter inability to escape or overcome one of them. Such a fear the blessed Saviour manifested in the garden of Gethsemane; and they who have most resembled him in his sufferings and obedience, have been the most serious and prayerful under its influence.

But there is a fear of another kind, and this we are here called on to lay aside; a fear which is the effect of unbelief, and the cause of murmuring, despondency, and wretchedness; a fear which tempts us to choose “sin rather than affliction;” which prevents us from praising God under our trials, and from trusting to him to bring us out of them. Such a fear as this is as dishonourable to God, as it is disquieting to ourselves, and he who values nothing so highly as his own honour and our happiness, commands us to yield to it no more. He has made it our duty to watch and pray in the hour of trouble, as though our troubles were ready to overpower us; but he bids us at the same time to be as peaceful and confiding, as though they had no power to hurt us.

To despise affliction, to be light-hearted and careless under it, is a proof that we are ignorant of its real nature and importance; while to faint and despond when it is laid on us, shows as clearly that we know not the power and loving-kindness of the Lord.

III. Now it might have been supposed that such an exhortation from such a Being would have been sufficient of itself to dispel the fears of those to whom it is addressed; but a compassionate God does not leave it to its own unaided authority. He supports and strengthens it by two most gracious *promises*.

1. He promises us *his own presence with us in our trials*. “When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee.”

But is not God always present with his people? Yes, brethren, he is; and not with them only, but with all that lives, and moves, and has a being. Since he formed the worlds, he has never for one moment been absent from any part of his immense creation. Wherever his creatures are, there God is, observing and upholding them. But he is present in a peculiar sense with the sinners whom he has redeemed. They are the objects of his special attention. He is present with others as a God of infinite power, justice, and goodness, as their Inspector, Judge, and Preserver; but he is present with his people as a God of infinite grace, love, and tenderness, as their Guide, Saviour, and Friend. And in their afflictions and distresses, this connection between him and his children becomes closer. The promise he has given them implies that he then draws nearer to them, and is more immediately with them. Not that he loves them more than he loves them at other times, or that their condition is really safer; but he manifests himself more to them, his love is in greater exercise, his grace in all its richness is in more powerful operation, his sympathy is deeper, and his compassion more intense. He goes, as it were, into the very rivers and flames with them, shares their afflictions, is touched with a feeling of all their infirmities. A parent always loves his child, but when that child is in peculiar danger or trouble, the love of the parent becomes more visible and active; the object of his affections occupies more of his thoughts, and receives more of his attention and regard.

We are not however to infer that the afflicted Christian is always aware of the companion with whom he is walking. The very contrary is often the case. He imagines himself to be left alone in his trials. He considers himself cast out of the sight of that God who once gladdened him with his presence, and wonders why he has forsaken him and whither he is gone. Christ walks with his disciples to Emmaus, but they know him not, and even to his face they mourn his absence.

Neither are we to suppose that all the afflicted servants of the Lord have the same manifestations of his presence. Some do not need them so much as

others. They have not the same temptations to withstand, nor the same burdens to bear, nor the same duties to perform. They are surrounded with more outward comforts, and consequently they less need those which are inward. The Lord delights to be the companion of him whom every one else forsakes; to manifest his tenderest compassion for the sufferer who has none to pity him; to bind up the heart which all others are seeking to wound. Some also do not desire or seek the light of their Father's countenance so earnestly as their brethren. They lean more on earthly friends and succours. They are not walking so closely with God, nor serving him so faithfully, nor depending on him so simply, nor waiting on him so patiently. He who is infinitely wise, always suits the nature and measure of his gracious manifestations to the necessities and, in one sense, to the characters of his people. He gives them what they need, and what they desire and seek.

2. But there is another promise in the text, a promise of *preservation under all our calamities*.

Now what does preservation imply? It implies that our trials shall not injure us. "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. And yet rivers are likely to overflow, and flames likely to burn those who pass through them. Affliction is likely to injure, and would inevitably ruin us, if God were not near. It brings with it many and great dangers. It tempts us to rebel against the divine providence and to distrust the divine goodness; to be thankless, impatient, and repining. The mind, already weakened perhaps and bewildered by the pressure of adversity, is easily led to apprehend still greater troubles, and faints at the prospect. We see the trial before us, but we are tempted to forget the everlasting arm which is underneath us. We feel the smart of the rod, but we perceive not that it is a Father's hand which holds it. The tempest rages around us, and we deem ourselves ready to perish, because we remember not that there is one sailing with us, whom the winds and the waves obey; who can say to the storm, "Be still," and there shall be a calm.

This too is the season when our great adversary is most to be dreaded. It is in the night, that the wild beasts of the forest roar after their prey; and it is in the darkness of spiritual or temporal adversity, that Satan directs against us his most violent assaults. The first temptation that assailed the upright Job, he encountered when sitting in sickness and wretchedness among the ashes; and the most subtle attack which the Saviour experienced from him, he endured in a desert while fainting with hunger and weariness.

The fact is, that our spiritual interests are much more endangered by tribulation, than our worldly prosperity. It is the soul, which is most exposed, and which most needs preservation; and preservation is here promised to it.

The Lord will defend it as with a shield. By calling the suffering graces of his people into exercise, he will render them invincible. He will enable them to pass through rivers of trouble, as safely as his beloved Israel passed through the Red Sea; and cause the fires of affliction to play as innocently around them, as they played around his three servants in the furnace at Babylon. Nay more; the very calamities which appeared likely to destroy every spiritual grace within them, to overwhelm their patience, their confidence and love, are made the means of displaying and brightening them all. They deepen their convictions of the vanity of the world and the worth of the soul; they show them more of the reality and power of religion; they enlarge their views of the loving-kindness of God and the tenderness of his mercy; they quicken them to prayer; they revive the feelings of contrition; they elevate their affections to the throne of Jehovah, and gladden the heart with a fore-taste of the blessedness which is reigning at his right hand. The Christian often enters the furnace cold-hearted, earthly-minded, and comfortless; he comes out of it peaceful, confiding, burning with love for his delivering God, and thirsting after the enjoyment of his presence. And thus “the trial of his faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, is found unto praise, and honour, and glory, at the appearing of Jesus Christ.”

IV. Such then are the promises by which the exhortation given us in the text is supported; and here surely the Lord will stop. But in the greatness of his condescension he goes farther. To force us to see and acknowledge our security, to drive from our souls the apprehensions of unbelief, the perplexity of fear, and the anguish of sorrow, he vouchsafes to add to his precious promises several reasons or *arguments* to assure us of their fulfilment.

1. The first of these is drawn from *the relation in which he stands to us as our Creator*. “Thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel.”

Now this language may be understood in a two-fold sense. It refers to our spiritual, as well as to our natural existence. The Lord called us at first into being his hands made us and fashioned us; and when we cast off the connection which united us to him, and threw away the heavenly life which he had given us, he created us again in Christ Jesus, made us new creatures, and moulded us anew into his own divine image. “This people,” says he, “have I formed for myself;” and his people acknowledge the operation of his regenerating hand; “We are his workmanship,” they say, “created in Christ Jesus unto good works.”

Here then is a solid ground of confidence. The Father of our spirits must be well acquainted with their infirmities and weakness. “He knoweth our frame, and remembereth that we are but dust.” He will not therefore suffer

us to be “tempted above that we are able.” “Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him.” “In all their afflictions, he is afflicted; and the angel of his presence saves them.” Neither will he ever forsake the work of his own hands. He formed us for himself, and to all eternity we shall show forth his praise. He raised us out of the ruins of the fall, made us temples in which he delights to dwell and be worshipped; and he will never suffer the structures which he has erected at so much labour and cost, to be thrown down by violence, or worn away by storms. He will “perfect that which concerneth us.” He will finish the good work in us, which he has begun. He will “keep us by his power through faith unto salvation.” “Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God, commit the keeping of their souls to him in well-doing, as unto a faithful Creator.”

2. But this is not all. The Almighty draws another argument to enforce his exhortation, from the *property which he has in his people, and the manner in which he acquired it*. “Fear not,” he says, “for I have redeemed thee; I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine.” We are his by creation, but he has also made us his by redemption.

And what a mighty price did he pay for us? He gave “Egypt for the ransom” of his ancient people, “Ethiopia and Seba for them;” but when we were to be redeemed, kingdoms and empires are too poor a ransom. “He spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all yea, “he purchased his church with his own blood,” and has never repented of the price. Hence he estimates us, not by what we are, but by what we have cost him. The consequence is, that we who are so worthless as to be almost unworthy of each other’s love, are regarded by him as his peculiar treasure. To remind us of our relation to him and the value he sets on us, he calls us by a new name, the name of Israel. He styles us his “purchased possession;” his “portion;” yea, his “pleasant portion;” “the lot of his inheritance;” his “glory;” his “royal diadem and crown.”

Will he then abandon that which he so much values, which cost him so dear? Will he fail to be with, to preserve, to provide for, his own? Never. He will keep them as “the apple of his eye.” “In his love and in his pity he redeemed them;” and the same love and pity, still operating in all their unsearchable richness, shall call forth his omnipotence to protect, and his grace to uphold, and his greatness to bless them.

3. There is yet another reason assigned why we should cast away fear in the hour of tribulation—*the covenant which God has formed with his people, ensures the fulfilment of his promises*. “I am the Lord thy God,” he says, “the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour;” thus implying that he has entered into some engagement with his Israel: that he considers himself bound to be with them in their troubles and distresses; that his own veracity, his own faithfulness, are at stake, and would be sacrificed if Israel were forsaken or injured. He

thus connects his own honour with their safety. For his own name's sake, he will never withdraw his loving-kindness from them; and for his honour's sake, he will arise, help, and deliver them in every time of trouble.

In reviewing the subject before us, there is one reflection which must have already occurred to us—*How rich in consolation is the word of God!* It not only bids the afflicted Christian cast away fear, but it encourages him to obey this command by affording him seasonable and precious promises; and as though these were not sufficient, as though the Holy One of Israel could not be taken at his word, it reasons with him, and gives him arguments to convince him that his God will not fail or disappoint him. It does not deceive him with flattering representations; it tells him, like a faithful witness, that he must expect to pass through much tribulation in his way to heaven; but then it reminds him of the power that created him, of the stupendous grace and mercy that redeemed him, of the inviolable faithfulness by which his salvation is secured; and it assures him that all these are as much concerned in his present as in his future welfare, are as much exercised in preserving him amidst the afflictions of time, as in saving him from the woes of eternity. It seems as though God were determined to make his afflicted children trust in him and be happy; as though he wrote the Bible for the very purpose of rejoicing their hearts. It is so peculiarly adapted to their condition, so wonderfully suited to the misgivings and workings of their minds, that none but he who knows the heart and feels the tenderest compassion for its sorrows, could have written it. It is in affliction that we learn its value and discover its richness, that we feel its power and taste its sweetness. Make it then the constant companion of your afflicted hours. As you enter the fire and the flames, resolve to meditate on it more frequently, to search it more diligently, to pray over it more fervently. He who delights in the law of the Lord, will not perish, will not even be dismayed, in his affliction. Trouble and anguish may take hold of him, but the statutes of God will still be his “songs in the house of his pilgrimage;” he will still “rejoice in the way of his testimonies; and love them as his “delight and his counsellors.”

How essential to our happiness is a knowledge of our interest in the divine promises!—not merely an occasional and feeble hope that we are the people for whom they were designed, but such an habitual and lively conviction of the fact, as will enable us to appropriate them to ourselves and rejoice in them.

It is clear that the promise in the text is not made to all mankind. It is addressed to Jacob, to Israel, to those whom God has formed for himself, redeemed, and made his own. It follows therefore, that we must be redeemed before we can have any interest in it, and that we must know we are redeemed before we can rejoice in it. This full assurance of hope is not indeed necessary

to our salvation, but it is necessary to our happiness. Without it, the troubled saint is like a wave of the sea, driven with the wind and tossed; with it, he is like a vessel safe at anchor in its port, defying every storm. The doubting Christian, when sorrow comes upon him, can scarcely lift up his trembling hands in prayer; while he who is strong in faith, wrestles with his God, and comes boldly to his throne. The one is bowed down with grief, and is almost a stranger to praise; the other has “songs and everlasting joy” resting on his head. The one hangs up his harp on the willows, sits down, and weeps; the other awakes up his lute and harp, and sings, though a pilgrim in a strange land, the songs of Zion. “Wherefore, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure.” A sure and certain hope is attainable by every redeemed sinner, a rational and scriptural hope, as free from the rashness of enthusiasm and the boldness of presumption, as the confidence of Job or the hope of Paul. It may be sought by you without arrogance, and if sought in the way of holiness and prayer, it will in the end be assuredly found. Covet it earnestly therefore; seek it diligently. Leave no longer in suspense a matter in which so much is involved; but, “forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

How full of confidence and praise ought they to be, who live in the enjoyment of the divine presence in the hour of trouble!

It is tranquillizing and sweet to have a beloved friend near us when our sorrows are multiplied upon us, but what is the presence of the dearest earthly friend, when compared with the presence of a sympathizing God? This of all consolations is the most cheering, of all blessings the most transcendent. Every other mercy is comprehended in it or flows from it. It defends us better than twelve legions of angels could defend us, and it imparts greater comfort to the soul, than all the inhabitants of earth and heaven could give, though they were all to unite their efforts to make us blessed. How did the church of old confide and exult in the enjoyment of this blessing! Her enemies troubled her; they were ready to overpower and destroy her; but she feared not their violence. They threatened and raged, but she sung aloud in the midst of her dangers; and this was the ground of her exultation and her boast in her triumph, “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.”

Another inference is suggested by the text— *How blind to their own interest are they who reject the gospel of Christ!*

You read and hear the rich promises of this gospel, but the consciences of many of you testify that you have no part or lot in them. And yet you might have an interest in these promises. You might have him who created and formed you, for your Saviour. You might be his, and he yours. You might enjoy his presence in affliction, and sing of his love and preserving care in tribulation. But you make light of these mercies. You willingly give them up.

And for what? For any thing that supplies their place? For any thing that makes you peaceful when trouble comes upon you? Alas, no! You sacrifice them for empty trifles; for bubbles which amuse you one hour, and then burst and disappoint you the next; for vanities which leave you dissatisfied even in your brightest hours, and which, when you most need their aid, in the day of adversity, in the hour of sickness, and on the bed of death, abandon you a prey to wretchedness and fear. Now, brethren, are you acting wisely, are you acting rationally, in resigning for these things the enjoyment of God? Are they worth the price you are paying for them? Is your conduct such as your own consciences approve? It is not, it cannot be. There are times when reason and conscience loudly condemn you. There are hours of retirement and darkness, when you are constrained to confess your folly, to feel your littleness, to be ashamed of your degradation.

And must it ever be thus? In a world so full of disquietude and calamity, must you ever be strangers to the only blessing which can support you under its burdens, and cheer you amidst its evils? Shall the parched and dying pilgrim refuse for ever to drink of the refreshing stream? In mercy to your souls, forsake the fountain of living waters no more. No more “spend money for that which is not bread,” nor “your labour for that which satisfieth not.” You have tried the world often and long, and it has always deceived you when you have tried it; you have found it to be exactly what the Bible describes it to be, “a broken cistern that will hold no water;” but you have never tried God, never sought consolation in him, never put the power of his gospel to the test. O be persuaded to make the trial now! Seek with your whole soul that mercy, and grace, and consolation, which he has treasured up for sinners in Christ. Deploring your folly and mourning over your guilt, go to that Saviour who can cure you of the one and cleanse you from the other. He has invited the weary and heavy laden to come to him. In compliance therefore with his gracious call, go and cast the burden of your sins and sorrows upon him, and you shall find rest to your souls, a peace which passes all understanding, a joy which none of the troubles of time can destroy, nor any of the events of eternity impair.