

SERMONS,

PREACHED

IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF

HIGH WYCOMBE.

BY

THE REV. CHARLES BRADLEY,

VICAR OF GLASBURY, BRECKNOCKSHIRE; AND MINISTER OF

ST. JAMES'S CHAPEL, CLAPHAM, SURREY.

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SERMON XVI.

THE ADVANTAGES OF A FREQUENT RETROSPECT OF LIFE.

DEUTERONOMY viii. 2.

Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee; to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments or no.

THIS was one of the dying charges which were given by Moses to the children of Israel. It is however as applicable to us, as it was to them. If we have not, like that peculiar people, been led through a wilderness, we are living in a world which closely resembles one; and the years we have past in it, ought to live in our memories and affect our hearts. We have not entirely done with these years. Their fleeting hours are indeed gone, but the God who gave them to us, requires them again at our hands. He requires not only an account of them, which must be rendered hereafter, but a remembrance and improvement of them, which must be our work and concern now.

To aid us in this work, let us direct our attention, first, to the way which we are called on in the text to remember; secondly, to the merciful designs of God in leading us along it; and, thirdly, to the advantages which we shall derive from a devout remembrance of it.

I. *The way which we are here called on to remember*, is, “all the way which the Lord our God has led us:” the whole course of his dispensations towards us from the day of our birth to the present hour. We cannot indeed recall every event that has befallen us, for many of them have long since been blotted from our remembrance; but they have all been deserving of our recollection, they are all important. Even the most minute occurrences in our history have had some influence on our condition and character; they are affecting us now, and will continue to affect us through an endless eternity.

1. But while all the events of our life ought to be preserved in our memories, those events ought especially to be treasured up there, which are more immediately connected with the way that is leading us to heaven. And among these *the means by which we were first brought into this way*, should hold a chief place.

There was a time when we were travelling in a very different path. We “walked according to the course of this world,” and heedlessly hurried on with the multitude around us in the broad road to destruction. But before the hour of destruction came, infinite mercy stopped us, and led us trembling into another path. What then were the means which were employed to stop

and to turn us? What were the circumstances which first brought us on our knees, and drew the first prayer from our hearts, and the first tear of contrition from our eyes? By what friend were we warned? By whose prayers were we moved? By whose example were we won? Let these questions often be answered. Let the commencement of our Christian pilgrimage be often reviewed; and let the feelings it excites be ever cherished in our breasts.

2. We are called on to remember also *the afflictions with which we have been visited since we have been walking in the path of life.*

We never knew what true happiness meant till we were led into this path, but notwithstanding the peace we have found in it, we have had many an hour of sorrow since we entered it. And ought we to forget these hours? Ought we to drive from our remembrance the scenes of trouble and temptation through which we have struggled; the days of sickness and despondency, which have been sent to us; the health that has forsaken us; the friends that are gone; the comforts that are fled; the gourds that are withered? O no! “Remembering our affliction and our misery, the wormwood and the gall, our soul hath them still in remembrance, and is humbled within us.” And thus, brethren, it should be. “Thou shalt also consider in thine heart,” says the prophet in the fifth verse, “that as a man chasteneth his son, so the Lord thy God chasteneth thee.” It is an awful thing to slight this command, and make light of this chastening. It is sinful to faint and be discouraged under affliction, but as for forgetting and despising it, the Christian trembles at the thought. If it must be so, let him “go softly all his days in the bitterness of his soul,” let him take a sorrowful and troubled spirit down with him to the grave—all will be well at last; but to have a careless and hardened heart, when “the Lord God of hosts calls to weeping and mourning,” is to be accursed and undone.

3. Neither must *our mercies* be forgotten in the retrospect of our lives.

It pleased God to distinguish the Israelites in the wilderness by very unusual interpositions of his power. We are told in the fourth verse, that for forty years their raiment waxed not old upon them, neither did their feet swell. When they were thirsty, “he brought them forth water out of the rock of flint;” and when they were hungry, he fed them with bread from heaven. The interference of God on our behalf has not been so visible, but it has not been less real. The food with which from day to day our table has been spread, the raiment which has covered us, the innumerable evils that have been warded off from us, and the daily comforts that we have enjoyed, are as much to be ascribed to the exercise of his providence, as though they had been given to us by a succession of miracles.

But there are few among us, who in looking back on the past, are not able to perceive some striking manifestations of the divine goodness towards them; and these we should more especially be often setting before us. We

should endeavour to bring them one after another into our minds, with all the various circumstances connected with them—their seasonableness, their greatness, the tenderness with which they were given, and the impressions which they made. Without this close and particular contemplation of our mercies, we shall be strangers to any lively feelings in the review of them. They must be singled out in order to produce any salutary effect. Indeed experience proves that a distinct review of one signal instance of mercy, will often force the heart to feel and the lips to praise, when a hurried retrospect of the general goodness of Heaven toward us will leave us cold and unmoved. Our memories then must be a register of mercies; a book, to which we can go and find recorded a history of every remarkable mercy wherewith God has visited us—the health which he has sent to us in the hour of sickness, the friends who have been raised up for us in the season of difficulty, the light which has arisen on us in our darkness, and the peace which has been shed abroad in our souls in our sorrow.

4. *The sins which we have committed in the midst of our afflictions and blessings*, must also be often retraced; not merely viewed in a mass, but, like our mercies, contemplated one by one with all their aggravations. Indeed if we are really acquainted with the power of godliness, whatever else we forget, we shall never forget our sins. The prisoner could as soon forget the walls which confine him, or the sick man the pain which is racking him. But to keep a lively sense of guilt in his mind, the most humble Christian will often find it necessary to go over the multiplied transgressions of his life. He must think of the pollutions by which some of his days have been stained, and the lusts by which many of his nights have been embittered; the careless and worldly state of his heart in prosperity, and its murmuring and unhumiliated state in adversity. He must recall the temptations to which he has yielded, the resolutions he has broken, the duties he has neglected, the evil tempers he has betrayed, the corruptions he has indulged.

II. The remembrance of these things however, in order to be beneficial to us, must be accompanied with a lively conviction of the overruling providence of God in all that has happened to us, and as lively a sense of his connection with us. It is not chance that has brought us hitherto. It is not chance that has regulated the circumstances in which we have been placed, and measured out to us the mercies and afflictions which we have received. No; it is God, “the Lord our God,” who has led us in all the way.

And it is the relation in which he stands towards us as our God, that gives so much importance to the past. It is this which makes our blessings so sweet, our trials so affecting, and our transgressions so fearful. The sins which array themselves before us, have all been committed against a Being of infinite power to avenge his wrongs, and of infinite mercy to pardon them: they have

dishonoured and wounded him who came down to the earth to die for us, and who now lives in heaven to save us. The trials which we have received, have come from a Father who loves us with a tenderness unknown to the children of men. Our blessings too have all been the gifts of One who is dearer to our souls, than any other being in the universe; pledges of his love, whose favour is better than life, and for the smiles of whose countenance we are ready to sacrifice every other delight. Why then has he so often troubled and grieved the people who love him so well, and are so exceedingly dear to him? What are his merciful designs in leading them through a wilderness to the land of their rest? The text answers this question. It points out to us *the ends* which God had in view in afflicting the Jews, and it consequently affords us the means of ascertaining the reasons of his diversified dispensations towards ourselves.

1. They are intended *to humble us*. All is humility in that kingdom wherein God dwells. Here, in this fallen world, the meanest sinner lifts up himself against him; but there the loftiest archangels cast down their crowns, and prostrate themselves before his footstool. Before we can enter that glorious world, we also must learn to abase ourselves. The pride which we brought into the world with us, must be rooted out, our spirit of independence broken, and our self-will destroyed. To effect this change is the first work of the Holy Spirit in our souls, and the immediate object of all the divine dispensations towards us.

We remember the thrilling sense of our depravity and meanness, which made us tremble, when sovereign mercy first led us aside from the thoughtless crowd; and we then imagined for a season, that our pride was destroyed for ever. But we soon discovered that the enemy was only repulsed. Before we were aware, it renewed the conflict, and has ever since been struggling to climb up again to its former throne in our hearts. Now affliction is designed to assist us in our warfare with this tyrant of the soul. It is sent to make us feel how weak and how vile we are, how little we have to trust in and how much to be ashamed of. The mercies also which are blended with our afflictions, are intended to revive and strengthen the same convictions. When not traced up to God as their author, their tendency is to puff us up, and thus to prepare the way for sharp tribulations for us; but when we receive them as the bounties of his grace, they excite in the Christian a feeling of shame and humiliation, which melts his soul. It is in these seasons of mercy, that the remembrance of his sins is so peculiarly lively and constraining. He sees that his God has pardoned them, and now he is not afraid to search them out. He remembers his guilt, and dwells upon the recollection, not because, being delivered from its condemning power, he is reconciled to it, but because it endears to him the grace which has pardoned it, and the Saviour by whose blood it has been cleansed.

2. The various changes in our condition have been designed also *to prove us*. “Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee, to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments or no.” Not that God is ignorant of our hearts; far from it; he knows them much better than we know them ourselves; but for wise and gracious reasons, he often puts his servants to the test, as though he knew them not, and tries their faith, their patience, and their love, by placing them in situations which are calculated to call these graces into exercise, and which, at the same time, render the exercise of them peculiarly difficult. At one time he gives them health and prosperity, to see whether they will consecrate to him their strength and abundance; at another time he lays them on the bed of sickness, and adds to the pains of sickness the trials of poverty, that he may know whether they will bless him when he takes away, as well as when he gives. Now he exalts them to honour, that he may try whether they will lay down their honours at his feet; and now he suffers persecution to rage against them, and exposes them to contempt and shame, that he may discover how much they are willing to sacrifice for his sake, and whether they have yet learned to glory in the reproach of Christ. Thus he tempted his beloved Abraham, when he commanded him to lay his only son Isaac on the altar. Thus, during his abode on earth, he tried his disciples, when he suffered the winds and the waves to toss them. And thus, in all the various occurrences of our life, he is proving us, putting our professed attachment to the test in every scene and every company into which we are carried, by every mercy which gladdens, and by every trouble which grieves us.

3. There is a third effect which the vicissitudes of life are calculated to produce—they have a tendency *to teach us the insufficiency of all worldly things to make us happy, and the all-sufficiency of God to bless us*.

This is a truth, brethren, which we are all very “slow of heart to believe.” Mankind in general utterly discredit it. In opposition to the plain declarations of the Bible, nay, in direct opposition to their own experience, they imagine that happiness is greatly, if not altogether dependent on external circumstances and the enjoyment of worldly prosperity. And even those among us, who have begun to set our affections on heavenly things, find it difficult to preserve a lively and abiding conviction of this truth. There are seasons indeed when we cannot doubt it; seasons in which the world seems nothing to us, and when the language of our heart is, “Lord, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us.” But we rise up from our knees, we lay aside our Bibles, we leave our closets; and then the things of the world, which but an hour before seemed so poor and mean, assume their wonted importance, and we are again tempted to think them necessary, or, at least, highly conducive to our happiness. We still believe that we might be enabled to be patient and submissive in tribulation; but as for being happy when our prospects are

blasted, our affairs ruined, our friends taken from us, and our children dead, the supposition appears to us erroneous, if not absurd.

To root out from our minds an opinion so dishonourable to him and so injurious to ourselves, the Lord places us in a variety of situations, and leads us through many diversified scenes. He surrounds us with all that the world desires and envies, leaves no earthly want unsupplied and scarcely an earthly desire ungratified; and then he suffers us to withdraw for a season from him, and makes our hearts ache within us, till we are brought to acknowledge the poverty of the things which we once deemed so rich in happiness, the utter emptiness of the cisterns which once seemed so full and refreshing. At another time, he takes from us almost all that he had given us, strips us of property, reputation, health, and relatives; and then he draws us near to himself, and puts such comfort, such peace, such exalted blessedness, into our hearts, that our most afflicted hours become our happiest. Thus he teaches us that in having him, even had we nothing else, we have all that we need desire; and that without him, though rich in every other good, we have nothing. This is the truth which is inculcated in the verse following the text. "He suffered thee to hunger," said Moses to Israel, "and fed thee with manna which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know, that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord, doth man live."

III. These then are the immediate purposes for which the Lord has led us through so many trials and mercies in our way to heaven. There are however other ends which they have been designed to answer; and that these may be accomplished, he commands us to look back on the course in which we have walked, and has connected with the retrospect many spiritual *benefits*.

1. A review of the past is calculated to *confirm our faith in the Bible*.

Our lives are practical illustrations of this blessed book. Indeed the whole world and all that is passing therein, is one continued commentary on it, and confirmation of its truth. Look at the world as the infidel looks at it; and what is it? A world of confusion and disorder, over which chance seems to rule in triumph, and where the mind is baffled as it endeavours to trace the footsteps of a wise and benevolent providence. But the scriptures solve the mystery. They give us a clue by which we unravel the mysterious scene around us, and discern the ever active agency of an awfully just but yet compassionate God. In going over therefore the history of our own lives, we shall be struck with a multitude of facts, in which the declarations, the promises, and the threatenings, of the Bible, are fully verified; facts which prove beyond the possibility of doubt, that he who wrote the Bible, is the same Being who is ruling the world, and ruling it too by laws which he has there made known to us. As we remember how deceitful our hearts have proved on some

occasions, and how desperately wicked on others; how weak we have been when confiding in our own strength, and how strong when seeking strength in God; how comfortless in the paths of vanity, and how peaceful in the ways of righteousness; when we recollect the aid which, sooner or later, has been vouchsafed to us whenever we have lifted up our eyes to heaven for deliverance, and the disappointments which we have invariably experienced when we have expected it from any other quarter; we see a veracity in the Bible, a power, wisdom, and faithfulness in its Author, which astonish and delight the mind.

2. A retrospect of the past has a tendency also *to increase our knowledge of ourselves*.

There is no kind of knowledge so useful as this, and yet there is none which is so difficult to be acquired, and none of which men in general are so destitute. The truth is that most of us are content to be destitute of it. We take no pains to acquire it, or at least no due pains. We expect to learn it in a month or a year; but it is a science which may employ a whole life in the study of it, and yet after all be but imperfectly learnt. We too often also neglect to seek it in the proper way. It is not to be acquired merely by listening to sermons, and reading books, and treasuring up the observations of others; it is the result of experience, of long, and close, and sometimes painful observation of our own minds. We accordingly find that those Christians who commune the most with their own heart, and are the best acquainted with its history, have the deepest views of human depravity and human weakness. They know more of human nature than other men, and more of themselves. And they have obtained this knowledge by often reviewing the past. They look back to a season of prosperity, and when they remember the pride, and selfishness, and vanity, which they manifested in it, they discover that the folly which was bound up in their hearts in their childhood, is still dwelling within them, and that they have as much reason as ever to distrust themselves. The remembrance of their afflictions also teaches them the same lesson. Before tribulation came, they imagined the world conquered for ever, every idol dethroned, and all their affections fixed on God; but disappointments and troubles have forced them to see that the world is not subdued, that it still exercises a sad and powerful influence over them, that the mind which they thought elevated for ever above the reach of the most tossing storms of life, can be agitated and distressed by some of its gentlest waves. And what are they deriving from a retrospect of these scenes? A knowledge of themselves; of the leading defects in their own character; of the graces for which they should most earnestly pray, and the evils against which they should most carefully watch; of what they should most strenuously labour to correct, to cast out, to improve, or to attain.

3. The remembrance enjoined in the text is calculated also *to strengthen our confidence in God*. It brings before our mind the help we have received in our difficulties, the supplies in our wants, the consolations in our troubles; and reasoning from the past to the future, we are naturally led to infer that he who never has forsaken us, never will forsake us; that the goodness and mercy which have followed us all the days of our life, will follow us still; that no vicissitudes in our condition, no tribulation, no distress, no persecution, no peril, “shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

It enables us to perceive also that the way in which we have been led, though it once seemed and may still seem perplexing, is the right way, the very best way in which we could have been led. As we look back on it, we see with wonder and thankfulness, that our greatest mercies are to be found among our heaviest afflictions; that our God has been the nearest to us, when we thought him the farthest off. We are now ready to acknowledge his goodness in what he has withheld from us, as well as in what he has given; in the prayers he has denied, as well as in the prayers which he has granted; in the sufferings that have humbled, as well as in the blessings that have gladdened us; in the weakness which has led us to him for strength, and in the strength which has enabled us to serve him; in the despondency which has embittered sin to our souls, as well as in the joy which has endeared to us a pardoning Saviour; in the clouds which first terrified us, and then poured down blessings on our heads, as well as in the light which has arisen on us in our darkness, and turned our heaviness into praise.

On the whole then, it appears that the command in the text, like every other command which God has given us, has our happiness, as well as his own honour, as its object. He bids us remember the way wherein he has led us, because he wishes to humble us, to prove us, to teach us his own all-sufficiency, and because he knows that we cannot rightly remember it without having our faith in the Bible established, our knowledge of ourselves increased, and our confidence in him strengthened. While therefore we anxiously enquire whether these effects have been produced, whether the changes and chances of this mortal life are doing their appointed work, softening, humbling, instructing, establishing us, let us endeavour to be more mindful of this command; to become better acquainted with our own history, not the history of our bodies only, where we were born, and where we have lived, and what sickness or health has been our lot, but the history of our minds; what influence the dispensations of God have had on them; what changes have taken place in them, and by what circumstances these changes have been produced; how their growth in grace has been promoted, and how it has been checked. Let us study the history of our principles and feelings,

as well as the history of our outward circumstances, and connect the history of both with God, regarding him as the Director of both, as the Inspector of both, as the Judge to whom we must eventually give an account of every thing that concerns both.

As for you, brethren, who are careless about your past mercies, trials, and sins, and occupied only with the scenes of the fleeting hour, let the text remind you that your forgetfulness of the past, like your unconcern about the future, is a certain mark of your present degradation and future misery. God has given you the power of recalling the events that have befallen you, and of looking forward, in some degree, to the things that are to come, and has thus distinguished you from the brute beasts that have no understanding; but you will not exercise the power he has given you. The present is all that can interest you. But though you forget it, “God requireth that which is past and though you shut your eyes to it, the future is real and certain, as real as the present, as certain as the past. You may live like the brutes, but you cannot perish like them. The powers of your mind, though not exercised, cannot be destroyed. They will live, and be called into action, in an eternal world. The moment you enter it, memory will be forced to execute its office, and will bring before you all the varied events of your existence. And can you bear this? To see for the first time your sins, when God is about to take vengeance on them; to think for the first time of your mercies, when you are about to be condemned for the abuse of them; to retrace for the first time your afflictions, when wrath is bursting on you for slighting them; to look forward for the first time into futurity, when there is no way of escape from its terrors, no hope to cheer you under its miseries;—if this, brethren, be the issue of forgetfulness, and this the end of the forgetful, which of you does not tremble at the prospect before him? Which of you does not resolve to be wise, to remember this, to consider his latter end?