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 XVII.

THE FEAR OF PETER WHEN WALKING ON THE SEA.

St. Matthew xiv. 30, 31.

*But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me. And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?*

We all know to which of our Lord’s disciples these words relate. Indeed had not his name been expressly mentioned, we could not have failed to discover in this history the ardour, the self-confidence, and eventually the weakness, which long distinguished the forward Peter from the other apostles.

In endeavouring to derive instruction from this instance of his frailty, let us consider, first, the fear which he manifested; secondly, the cause of this fear; thirdly, its consequence; fourthly, the prayer which it drew from him; and, lastly, the conduct of Christ towards him.

I. 1. *The fear which Peter betrayed* on this oc­casion, reminds us, as soon as we glance at it, of one humiliating fact—*the transient nature of our best and strongest feelings when they are not kept alive by divine grace.*

But a few minutes before, he had shown a courage and a faith, which were well warranted indeed, but which were at the same time truly admirable. In the midst of a tempestuous sea, we behold him stepping from the side of his tossed ship, and committing himself voluntarily and boldly to the waves, with no other hope of pre­servation than what he derived from his depen­dence on the power of his Master. But now though that power is miraculously upholding him, we see him suddenly losing his confidence in it, and yielding to the most faithless fear.

The same inconsistency appeared in him on other occasions also; and it has appeared not in him only, but in all who have partaken of his fallen nature. Look at Abraham. At one time when he was tried, his faith was so strong that his hand was uplifted to sacrifice his only son; at another time, in the country of Abimelech, he was so overpowered by fear, that he hesitated not to have recourse to falsehood, in order to save himself, not from a real, but from an imaginary danger. Look at Jeremiah. We find him, in the twentieth chapter of his prophecy, holding a long and painful conflict with the workings of unbelief. At length he seems to have triumphed over them, and breaks forth in the thirteenth verse into this exclamation of confidence and praise; “Sing unto the Lord; praise ye the Lord; for he hath de­livered the soul of the poor from the hand of evil­doers.” And how long does this strain of triumph last? But for a moment. As though to show us how quickly the most confident believer can sink into despondency and how low he can fall therein, he utters in the very next verse the language of unmixed despair. “Cursed,” he says, “be the day wherein I was born. Let not the day wherein my mother bare me, be blessed.”

But we need not go to patriarchs and prophets to find this inconsistency. We feel it in our­selves. There are seasons, when there appears a reality, a life, and a warmth, in our religion. Our love is ardent, our faith steadfast, our hope tower­ing. Our mountain stands strong; and then we say that we shall never be moved, that emotions so deep and powerful must be lasting. But let a few days, or perhaps only a few hours pass, and what is our language then? “The Lord hath hid his face from us, and we are troubled.” All our lively feelings are gone. Our soaring hopes are changed into gloomy apprehensions, our glow­ing joys into a most distressing coldness. We still make a Christian profession; but we look into ourselves, and can see little or nothing there which warrants it, nothing which distinguishes the sanctified from the worldly heart.

Now this painful experience should caution us against attaching too much importance to lively feelings. When we enjoy them, it should teach us to expect their departure; when we are desti­tute of them, to remember that by prayer and renewed application to Christ, they may yet re­turn; and, at all times, it should lead us to be fearful of making them in any degree the grounds of our dependence; to consider them as the gifts of a divine Comforter, designed to refresh, but not to puff up, the Christian; to encourage his exertions, but not to make him trust in them; to give him strength, not to lead him to forget his weakness; to enable him to glory in the cross of Christ, not to give him reason to imagine that he no longer needs the sprinkling of the blood that stained it.

2. But the fear of Peter not only reminds us of the fleeting nature of our best feelings, it shows us also *the danger of needlessly putting to the trial our highest graces.*

When our faith appears strong, we are tempted to think that no difficulties, no troubles, can sub­due it. The consequence is, that we sometimes rush unbidden into temptation, under the idea that we shall be able to endure it, and even bring glory to Christ, as well as manifest our love to him, by our conduct under it. Now this perhaps was exactly the case with Peter. As he beheld his Lord walking on the sea, he was impressed with a new and deep conviction of his power, and an ardent desire of being with him. Thus far all was well; but in order to gratify this de­sire and to display the strength of this conviction, he quickly resolves to make use of the grace of which he conceives himself possessed, and asks permission of Christ to come to him on the waves. Christ gave him permission; and when he had shown him his own greatness and the efficacy of a firm belief in it, he discovered to his rash disciple the weakness of his fancied strength, and led him back to his vessel humbled and ashamed.

And thus has every presumptuous display of grace terminated. We have never in any degree sought our own glory, without bringing on our­selves, instead of glory, humiliation and shame. We have never attempted to display our greatness, without exposing our littleness. The very mo­ment our graces are proudly tried or confided in, they leave us; and what are we then? No more like what we once were, than that man whom the Philistines bound with fetters in his weakness, was like the Samson who had formerly driven his enemies before him. No more like the servants of Christ, than Peter was, when the voice of a servant-maid caused him to deny his Lord. No more like men of godliness, than David was, when overcome by his lusts. Wherever duty calls, there we should go, and there we may go with safety, though it be through a stormy sea, over mountains of difficulties, and into the most raging fires of temptation. A humble reliance on Christ will quench the violence of the fire, cause the mountains to become a plain before us, and the depths of the sea “a way for the ransomed to pass over.” But to go rashly into danger is to be humbled and overcome.

II. Let us now go on to consider, secondly, *the cause of Peter’s fear.*

We are told that “when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid.” But it could not be the mere rage of the elements, which made him fear, for they were equally raging when he first put his feet on the waves. It was his confining his attention to their violence; his fixing his eye on his danger, and forgetting the power of his Lord.

Here then we are taught, not to be unmindful of our dangers, but *to keep our thoughts fixed on the greatness and faithfulness of Christ when we are surrounded by them.*

Nothing however is more difficult than to prac­tise this lesson. Affliction is sent to us, and we determine when we are first visited by it, to think only of the loving-kindness of him who has sent it; but stroke follows stroke, sorrow is heaped upon sorrow, one cloud gathers round another, till at length our pitying Father is no longer visible; former deliverances are forgotten; we see the wind boisterous, and seeing not him who is walking with us on the waves, we are afraid.

At another time, we have arduous and painful duties to perform. We begin them with a firm conviction of the all-sufficiency of him who has promised, that, as is our day so shall our strength be; and as long as this conviction lasts, they are performed with cheerfulness and almost with ease; but in the midst of them, the omnipotence of divine grace is forgotten, and then our duties assume a new and formidable appearance; our hands drop, and we are again afraid.

The case is often the same also, when tempta­tions are multiplied around us, and our inward corruptions are harassing us. We see the great­ness of our guilt, the utter helplessness of our nature; and, forgetting the blood which “cleanseth from all sin,” and the strength which honours itself in being made perfect in our weakness, we deem ourselves ready to perish; and again our hearts fail us for fear.

In all these cases, and indeed in every case, the cause of our fear is the same. It is to be found in low conceptions of Christ, or in a partial forgetfulness of him. And, in order to overcome it, we must for a season look less at our dangers and sins, and contemplate more closely the omni­potence and mercy of him, who can deliver us from the one and save us from the other. Why was Abraham strong in faith? The apostle tells us; “Because he considered not his own body now dead, neither yet the deadness of Sarah’s womb; but because he gave glory to God, and was fully persuaded that what he had promised he was able to perform.”

Away then, brethren, with all foolish reasonings about the greatness of your troubles, the difficulty of your duties, the unpardonable nature of your sins. They indicate no humility. They have their origin in nothing which is good, and lead to nothing which is useful. On the contrary, they always spring from ignorance and generally from pride also; they impeach the credit of the divine promises, and shake our confidence in them; they limit the Holy One of Israel, and assign bounda­ries to those perfections which angels know to be infinite; they agitate and distract the mind, and often tempt us to have recourse to indirect and sinful means of deliverance—means which appear likely to open to us a way of escape, but which serve only to entangle us the more. The man who would be happy in trouble and peaceful in difficulties, must make reason humble itself to faith. In fact, he must cease to reason at all about the matter. With his eyes fixed on that Saviour in whose arm is everlasting strength, and on whose shoulder rests the government of the universe, he must say, “What does the Lord my God require of me? That let me do. What has he promised me? In that let me trust.”

III. The importance of faith will however be still more evident, if we consider, thirdly, *the consequence of Peter’s fear.* He began to sink. And why did he not sink before? Because he honoured Christ by believing in his power, and then Christ honoured him by enabling him to tread the waves underneath his feet. When his faith was strong, he walked on the water; when it failed him, he sunk.

One thing then is clear—*Our support in dangers and trials depends on our faith.* Not that faith can do any thing of itself to help us; but this is the grace which peculiarly honours’ God, and which he is therefore determined to cover with honour wherever he finds it. Other graces may be in some respects of a higher character; hope may be more elevating, and love more disin­terested and lasting; but faith submits to God’s authority; it lies low at his footstool; gives him there the credit of his faithfulness, his power, and his glory; and then it rises up, and nothing can withstand it. It overcomes the world with all its manifold temptations. It smiles at dangers, tri­umphs over difficulties, rejoices in tribulation, and sings in persecution. Nay, it has controlled the elements, and changed the course of nature; “subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, ob­tained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire,” turned armies to flight, and raised the very dead to life. It makes a man while living a wonder to all around him, and when he dies, it saves his soul.

When therefore, in the hour of trial, we re­nounce the aid of this mighty principle, we shall most certainly sink; the weakest temptation will overpower, the most trifling difficulty dishearten, and the slightest danger alarm us. It matters not to what other means of support we may have re­course. We may reason wisely and even piously about our trials, and endeavour to fortify ourselves under them by recollecting all we have heard of the advantages of overcoming and the uselessness of yielding to them; but we shall find that our fears will not be reasoned away; that the wisest arguments will not make trouble sit easy upon us, nor silence the murmurs of discontent, nor quiet an accusing conscience. Before effects like these can be produced, we must discover a more simple and a more powerful instrument of consolation; and where is this to be found? Only in that gospel, in which we are most unwilling to look for it. Other things may keep us thoughtless and hardened in our trials; but we can be made peace­ful under them only by a heartfelt belief in the Bible; by that faith which the men of the world have agreed to misunderstand and despise, but the cheering energy of which thousands of the af­flicted children of God are hourly experiencing. By faith they live; by faith they stand; by faith they walk; by faith they rejoice “with joy un­speakable and full of glory.”

IV. But this is not all. If we notice, fourthly, *the prayer which the fear of Peter drew from him,* we shall discover in the end that faith can raise us up, even when unbelief has laid us low. And what was this prayer? “Lord, save me.”

Now this petition, short as it is, may remind us of two facts.

1. This is the first of them—*In all our troubles and fears, if we are really Christians, we shall be men of prayer.*

It is secret and fervent prayer which first ren­ders visible the work of a sanctifying Spirit; and when other marks of true religion are no longer to be seen in us, when love has ceased to animate and faith to uphold, it is fervent prayer which still proves that he who began the good work, has not forsaken it. The trials of the Christian cause him to feel his helplessness; they bring him to his right mind; and then out of the depths he cries unto the Lord, and in his distress he calls upon his God. And though he is aware that his own pride and folly have brought his troubles upon him, it matters not. This con­sideration does not deter him from seeking refuge in his Saviour. The danger of Peter was the fruit of his own rashness, and yet he cries, “Lord, save me.” The horrible situation of Jonah in the deep, when the floods compassed him about, and all the billows and the waves passed over him, was only the merited punishment of his dis­obedience; he knew it to be such; and yet when his soul fainted within him, he “remembered the Lord,” and his “prayer came in unto him, even unto his holy temple.”

The truth is, that the servant of God is under all circumstances, in a greater or less degree, a man of prayer. Look at him in whatever condi­tion we may, whether in prosperity or in adver­sity, whether steadfast in faith or sinking with fear, whether “rejoicing in hope” or cast down with despondency, that may be said of him, which can be said of no other man, “Behold, he prayeth.”

2. The other truth exemplified in this prayer is this—*The fears of the real believer, however strong, are still accompanied with a cleaving to Christ,* with a conviction of his power to save, and an appeal to his mercy.

“When Peter saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid;” his faith appeared utterly gone, and he began to sink; but still he sinks “looking unto Jesus.” At the very moment when the waves were about to close over him, his eyes were turned to­wards his Master; and had he perished in the sea, his last words would have manifested his be­lief in the Redeemer’s power.

And thus the true Christian, even in his most faithless hours, when he is ready to think all lost for ever and his ruin near, has still exalted thoughts of his Lord’s ability to save, and a secret hold on him—a hold, which, though it may seem weak or be scarcely seen at all, is yet so strong that no­thing can break it. In the extremity of his dan­ger, his faith will become visible; and though it may be accompanied with much fear and sullied by much unbelief, it will show itself to be real. His language will be, “Lord, save me.” “Though I dare not take refuge in thee, I have no other refuge to flee to. I dare not hope in thy mercy, but I know thine infinite power to save; I know that if thou wilt, thou canst help even me. I will therefore lie at thy feet, and though I perish, I will perish there; and this shall be my dying cry, Lord, help me; Lord, save me.”

V. Such was the prayer of Peter: and what was the result of it? The account which is given us in the text of *the conduct of Christ towards him,* will inform us.

How justly might the Saviour have turned his ear from his cry! The faithless disciple had but a moment before walked on the sea, and it supported him; his Master, who had made it firm beneath his feet, was still standing on its waves, and they had no power to hurt him; but notwithstanding he had such convincing, such apparently overpower­ing testimonies of the omnipotence of his Lord, he heeded them not; he looked at the boisterous tempest, and his faith failed. And now surely the insulted Jesus will suffer him to perish, or at least to remain for a season, like Jonah, in terror and suspense. But no; his heart is as full of love as Peter’s is of fear; and the cry of the sinking man no sooner reaches his ears, than he answers him with “the saving strength of his right hand;” he preserves him in his arms. “And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, where­fore didst thou doubt?”

1. Now this was an act of almighty power, and may teach us, first, that *there is no situation in which Christ cannot help us;* that we can bring ourselves into no perils from which he cannot extricate us, that we can be harassed by no fears from which he cannot deliver us, that we can be burdened by no sins from which he cannot save us. Here the winds and the waves obey his voice; and when the safety of his people is endan­gered, all nature obeys it also, and all that lives, and moves, and has a being. He has caused the ravens to feed them; he has sent down his an­gels to deliver them; yea, when they have been tried above measure, he has himself left the throne of his glory to help them, and passed with them through the waters, and walked with them in the flames. “All power is given unto him in heaven and in earth,” so that “he is able to save to the uttermost;” to make “all things work together for good to them that love him,” and to show himself strong in their behalf.

2. But the preservation of Peter was an act of mercy as well as of power, and, viewed in this light, may teach us that if we are his obedient people, *there is no state in which Christ will not save us.* His people may doubt his love, may dishonour and grieve him by their unbelief, and he will reprove their sin; but he will never be what their fears represent him, an absent or a forgetful Sa­viour. He will suffer their doubts to rob them of their peace, but he will still keep them as his jewels and love them as his children. Were they indeed entirely to give up their hold on him, they would sink into destruction; but he keeps alive within their heart the faith which his own Spirit has implanted there: and when others see it not and they themselves feel it not, he marks it well; and sooner might heaven and earth perish, than he refuse to hear its cry or to grant its prayer. The truth is, that there can be no heartfelt prayer without some degree of faith; and it is equally true, that the weakest faith, if it be real, gives the sinner an interest in the promises of Christ, as actually as the strongest, and makes his final, though not his present happiness as sure. The comfort of the gospel is the portion of those only whose faith is strong; but the salva­tion of the gospel is the portion of all whose faith is real. The one must necessarily depend in a great measure on the workings of our own minds, on feelings which are too often as fluctuating as the waters of an exposed sea; the other is founded on that righteousness which is always perfect, on the efficacy of that blood which is always availing, on the finished work of that Redeemer who is “the same yesterday, today, and for ever.”

To what conclusion then are we to come? Are we warranted to say that if these things are so, we may rest satisfied with a faith which is weak and unstable; which cures us of no follies, and roots out of us no sins; which enables us to overcome no temptations and to endure no trials; which leaves us the slaves of the world and the obedient servants of its prince? God forbid! To be satisfied with such a faith as this, is to be satisfied with that which makes the devils tremble. Indeed to be content with any faith, however strong it may appear, is to prove that we are merely deceiving ourselves, that we have no genuine faith at all. True faith is a growing grace, and he in whose heart it has once been planted, will never be satis­fied unless he sees that it is growing; he will never think that he can have enough of it, but will be ever crying, “Lord, increase my faith.” Instead of being reconciled to his unbelief by the history before us, he will see how much he has injured himself by it, and will leave this house of prayer mourning over it, and condemning himself on account of it. The words of his Lord will be yet sounding in his ears, “Wherefore dost thou doubt?” And he who follows him to his closet, will hear him praying there, that he may be enabled this day to cast out of his heart the fears which are depressing it; will see him striving to bring forth these enemies of his soul, and to slay them at his Saviour’s cross.

From this hasty consideration of Saint Peter’s fear on the sea, it is evident that it may afford in­struction to us all. It bids the self-confident dis­trust themselves, and it encourages the fearful to trust Christ. It calls on those who are strong in faith, to give God the glory, and be thankful; on those who are weak in faith, to take to themselves the shame, and be humble.

And what is its language to you who are strangers to heartfelt faith? Not that which you are anxious to make it speak. It does not tell you that you may live a prayerless and unchristian life, and yet be real believers in Jesus. Far from it. It shows you a man who had forsaken all he possessed for Christ; so ardent in his love for him, that he was willing to commit himself to a raging sea in order to be with him; and yet so submis­sive in his zeal, as to wait for his permission before he ventured to approach him:—it shows you this man trembling on the waves, but still, in the midst of his fear, manifesting his high sense of the Redeemer’s greatness, and praying for his aid; and while you are pitying his momentary weak­ness, and admiring his courage, his love, his obedience, and his confidence, it represents the Saviour as giving him a reproof, passing over in silence all that has excited your admiration, and censuring that very faith which appears to you so extraordinary, as little. How then can you force from such a scripture as this any thing like encouragement? You have sacrificed nothing for Christ; you have far less love for him than you have for your vanities and follies; you have no desire to be with him; you live for weeks and months together without ever calling in earnest upon his name: and yet because Peter had infir­mities, you imagine them recorded to comfort you, and deem yourselves safe in the midst of your sins. Where among the people you revile shall we discover folly, fanaticism, and licentiousness, like this? Brethren, the language of the text to you is not that of consolation. It says to you, and may God give you an ear to listen to its voice, “He that believeth not shall be damned.” “From him that hath not, shall be taken away, even that which he seemeth to have.”