SERMONS,

PREACHED IN

THE PARISH CHURCH OF GLASBURY,

BRECKNOCKSHIRE,

AND

ST. JAMES’S CHAPEL, CLAPHAM,

SURREY.

**BY**

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SERMON IV.

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THE VICISSITUDES OF HUMAN LIFE.

Zechariah xiv. 6, 7.—“*It shall* *come* *to pass in that day, that the light shall not be clear nor dark; but it shall be one day which shall be known to the Lord, not day nor night; but it shall come to pass, that* *at* *evening time it shall be light.*”

The time to which this passage relates, is uncertain. It is usually understood as descriptive of the present state of the church, and prophetical of the glorious period which will follow the restoration of the Jews, and the conversion of the heathen. We must however wait God’s time, not only for the fulfilment of all his promises, but for a full explanation of some of them. Not that we are to pass over any of the prophecies as useless. To a certain point, their meaning is generally plain. Even when their pri­mary reference to others is doubtful, they often admit of a secondary and instructive application to ourselves.

The scripture before us may be viewed in this light. It offers to our consideration, first, the mixed condition of the servants of God in the present world; secondly, the divine wisdom in allowing it to be thus mixed; thirdly, the consolation offered us amidst its changes; and, lastly, the happy termination of them all.

I. “It shall come to pass in that day, that the light shall not be clear nor dark it shall be “not day nor night.” These figurative expressions well describe the *pre­sent mixed condition of the righteous.* By day and night, light and darkness, are meant knowledge and ignorance, sin and holiness, prosperity and adversity, hope and fear. And when it is said that it shall be neither day nor night with the people of God, we are to understand that their con­dition in the world is neither perfectly good nor perfectly evil, that there is mixture and change in their portion.

1. Look at *their knowledge;—*how limited, how dark is it! This they know, for God has taught it them, that to win Christ is sal­vation; but how little do they know of Christ, of the glory of his person, the tenderness of his love, the riches of his grace, the depth of his condescension, the height of his great­ness! They talk of heaven, and they know enough of it to long to be there; but ask them to describe its actual blessedness, and they are obliged to have recourse to terms, to which they themselves can attach hardly one clear idea. And what do they know of God? of his infinite and eternal nature, of his works and ways? And what of their own hearts? They search them indeed diligently, and would know them thoroughly, but they are baffled. There is a desperate wickedness within their breasts, an ex­ceeding deceitfulness, an inconsistency, a strangeness, which they cannot explore. In a word, they have just light sufficient to discover the thick darkness of their souls, just knowledge sufficient to show them their ignorance, just wisdom enough to make them cry out with the straitened psalmist, “Lighten mine eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.”

2. But this mixture of light and dark­ness is still more evident in *the* *outward cir­cumstances of their condition.* And we need not refer here to an imprisoned Joseph, or a dethroned David, or a troubled Israel. The whole church of God declares with one voice, “Thou hast lifted me up, and cast me down.” We ourselves have experienced changes; some of us are experiencing them still—great and unexpected changes, such as in our childhood and youth we never thought of—such as even now we can hardly believe to be real. We have sung of mercy one hour; the next perhaps we have wept under distressing judgments. Today the God of providence smiles on us; tomorrow he frowns. Now he lifts us up in the world higher than even our once buoyant hopes ever rose; and now again he sinks us lower than our darkest fears had ever placed us. And all this while we cannot discover what he is doing with us; so perplexing are his doings, so obscure his purposes, that we cannot understand them. All we can do, is to stand still and wonder; and all we can say of the matter, amounts to no more than this, “His way is in the sea, and his path in the great waters, and his footsteps are not known.”

3. And how stands the case, if we turn from our outward to our *inward comforts?* Owhat a wonderful mixture of light and darkness, what strange vicissitudes are there! Comforts indeed we have, comforts which we would not lose for all the pleas­ures that the world can give, could they all be poured at the same moment into our hearts; but then how soon are these comforts gone! how easily are they lost! with how much sorrow are they sometimes preceded, and with how much bitterness are they at other times followed! Look at the tossed Christian—one hour almost as happy as an angel, the next “of all men the most miserable;” his mind at one time peaceful as the ocean in an evening calm, at another time “like the troubled sea when it cannot rest;” now exclaiming, “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?” and now, “O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me?” in the morn­ing, singing as if he were at the gate of heaven; and in the evening, groaning as though drawing nigh to hell.

4. And whence arises this fluctuation of feeling, this mixture of peace and dis­quietude? It arises from a mixture else­where, from *wavering holiness.* There are changes here also. The justification of every pardoned sinner is ever the same, fixed and immutable as the love of Christ; but his sanctification is only in progress, advancing indeed, but impeded by many hindrances and liable to many partial de­clines. He feels “a law in his members warring against the law of his mind;” “the flesh lusting against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh;” faith struggling with unbelief, the love of Christ with the love of the world;” impatience sometimes yielding to submission, and sometimes over­coming it; hope rising out of fear, and fear clouding hope; heavenly affections soaring upward to their God, and earthly desires clinging to the soul and keeping it from its rest.

Such is the Christian’s day. Whether we look at his knowledge, his outward cir­cumstances, his inward comforts, or his holiness, we discover at once that his sun does not always nor brightly shine; that he is “brought out of darkness into light,” but that his day is a day of cloud and storm; that, in the present life, his state is not al­together evil nor completely blessed. It be­comes a question then, Why is it thus with him? and to answer this, we must consider—

II. *The wisdom of God in allowing the present condition of his servants to be thus chequered.*

1. He acts thus towards them, that *their corruptions may be subdued.*

Prosperity and adversity serve as correc­tives to each other. The evils which the one is calculated to foster, the other has **a** tendency to counteract. What should we become, if unmingled prosperity, if uninter­rupted sunshine, were our lot? As it was with Hezekiah, it would be with us, our “hearts would be lifted up;” vanity, and pride, and earthly-mindedness, would sap the foundation of the little religion we pos­sess, and destroy our souls.

And, on the other hand, continual adver­sity, unbroken sorrow of any kind, would have its dangers. It is in the night, that the beasts of the forest seize on their prey; it is in our darkness, that Satan often gives us our severest blow, and leaves on our soul its foulest stain. Who that has been deeply tried, has not experienced something of the weakening, disheartening effect of long-continued afflictions? something of the selfishness, and despondency, and sloth, and aching for sympathy, and that almost un­conquerable proneness to make flesh our arm, which are frequently connected with spiritual or mental sorrow?

Out of compassion therefore to our in­firmities, the Lord diversifies our state. That we may not forget him in the light, he sends us darkness; and then, that our feet may not stumble, that our hearts may not fail us in the darkness, he causes the light again to rise on us, and we are comforted.

2. Another end is also accomplished by this procedure—*it brings our graces into ex­ercise;* it manifests and strengthens them. Some of these are called forth by prosperity only, at least they shine then with peculiar brightness; such are moderation, deadness to the world, self-denial, humility. Others again are seen only or chiefly in the night of affliction—submission, contentment, pa­tience, all the suffering graces of the Spirit. Hence the “all-wise God, our Saviour,” so orders his dispensations, that his people “may be exercised in all manner of godli­ness,” that they may be “perfect, tho­roughly furnished unto all good works.” Sometimes he places them in the immediate light of his countenance, and causes them to glorify him there; and then he brings them into a low and afflicted condition, and there too they bring honour to his name. Were he to keep them in one uniform, un­varied state, half the graces he imparts to them would be hidden, and much of his glory in their sanctification would be lost.

3. This diversified experience is designed also to *bring the people of God to a more simple dependence on himself.* It accom­plishes this end by showing them their own weakness and the divine strength.

How soon, when the light either of provi­dence or of grace shines on our path, do we begin to think that we ourselves have caused it to shine! We forget that all our “fresh springs” are in God. Our own righteous­ness, prudence, and foresight, rise in our estimation, till we are tempted to believe that we can stand alone, till we find our­selves ready to act as though we could con­trol, not the workings of our own minds only, but all the events that concern us in a changing world. The Lord therefore vin­dicates his honour. Unexpectedly perhaps and suddenly, he changes our condition; or if he leaves that untouched, he suffers our feelings under it to change; and then, “in the fulness of our sufficiency,” we are “in straits.” We see that we ourselves are powerless. We think of the forgotten lan­guage of our God, and are humbled by the recollection of it; “I form the light and create darkness. I make peace and create evil. I, the Lord, do all these things.” And this is the season which he chooses for a fresh display of his all-sufficiency. Our earthly prospects brighten as suddenly as they were before clouded; or if all is still darkness there, light springs up within. Stripped of the friends or comforts which seemed but a short time ago our all, we are happier than they ever made us. The Lord no longer “pleads against us with his great power,” but “puts his strength” within us, and we become a wonder to our­selves.

III. Now these considerations, while they show us the wisdom of God in the changes to which we are subject, are sufficient of themselves to encourage us to bear them without a murmur; but we find in the text other grounds of *consolation,*

1. It reminds us of *the notice which God takes of our varied condition;* “It shall be one day which shall be known to the Lord.” And the word signifies more than “known;” it implies that this varied day, with all its storms and calms, has been appointed, and ordered, and approved by him. Whatever befalls us, his eye is upon it, and his hand and counsel are in it. He knows all our difficulties, sorrows, infirmities, and tempta­tions; he sees all our conflicts and dangers, even before we feel them; and suits his ways to our necessities. There is not a thought in our hearts, but “he understands it afar off;” not a movement, which has not some influence on his dealings towards us.

Mark how this consideration strengthened Job in one of his saddest hours. All was darkness around him. He looked anxiously for his God, but he could neither see nor find him. He remembered however that God beheld him; that though he hid him­self, he was near him and working for him; and Job took courage. “Behold,” he says, “I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him; on the left hand where he doth work, but I cannot behold him; he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him; but he knoweth the way that I take; when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold.”

2. We may notice further for our comfort, *the* *harmony of the mixed events of our life.* This also seems to be implied in the text; “It shall be one day,” or, as it is translated in the margin, “the day shall be one.” It shall be one course of providence. All the changes in it shall be agreeable to one plan, shall further the same design, shall have the same end. And you know, brethren, what this design is, even your sanctification; and you know what this end will be, your everlasting salvation. The prophet seems to intimate here what an apostle afterwards plainly declared, “All things work together for good to them that love God.” They “work together for good.” Viewed singly, some of them might appear to injure us; if they befell us alone, they might really injure us; but they are work­ing “together;” they are performing their part in a long and connected plan, and are as necessary for our welfare as the things that most gladden us. Think of the seasons of the year. One follows another, and sometimes intermingles itself for a while with it. The barren winter succeeds the fruitful summer, and often pushes itself into the opening spring; and yet which of the seasons is useless? By their connection with each other, by their mutual influence, they all benefit the earth, and cause it to bring forth fruit for our use.

3. But take this expression in another sense, as intimating *the shortness of this chequered scene.* This mixture of light and darkness shall be for one day only, one short day. And what is life, with all its hurry and turmoil, its succession of hopes and fears, and joys and troubles? “It is but a vapour that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.” Its days may be evil, but lengthen them out to the utmost, they are but few. While we are struggling with its changes, its weeks, and months, and years, are hurrying on. While pain and sickness oppress us, they are wearing us out; they are leading us gradually to the grave, and there “the weary are at rest.”

It is marvellous that we think so little of this truth, and draw so little consolation from it. In the gloominess of our imagina­tions, we paint a long dark scene between us and the tomb; life stretches itself out before us a dreary and almost endless waste, over which we must pass in tribulation and sorrow: but these dreaded evils may never come. There may be “but a step between us and death.” We may even now be standing on the verge of heaven.

I am aware, brethren, that this is low ground for a child of God to take; but **we** cannot always rise to the higher consola­tions of the Christian life, and why, in such a world as this, with faith so weak as ours, should we turn away from any source of consolation, which divine compassion ha**s** opened? An apostle did not disdain even this. “The time is short,” said the troubled Paul; and this is one of the inferences which he drew from its shortness, “It remaineth that they that weep, be as though they wept not.”

But this is not all.

IV. Consider, lastly, how this short day will end, *the happy termination of all its changes;* “It shall come to pass, that at evening time it shall be light.”

This promise may be applied to the present life. It may serve to teach the afflicted, that their deliverance is sometimes the nearest, when it seems the farthest from them; that mercy often comes, when we look only for deeper wretchedness. It may also encourage them to hope that their last days will be their best, that the evening of their life will be the holiest and happiest part of it.

But let us give the words a higher mean­ing; let us consider them as leading us into a heavenly world. They will then bring two facts before us.

1. *The Christian’s present state of mingled good and evil will end in a state of unmingled good.*

There is no mixture or change in eternity. All there is fixed and stable, pure mercy or pure judgment. Hell is set forth as “utter darkness;” and of heaven it is said, “There is no night there;” it is one unclouded, bright, and eternal day. The little light which we enjoy here, is a reflec­tion of its brightness; it is an earnest that we shall enjoy it all hereafter; “the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.” We are only in the twilight now; a bewilder­ing, though a cheering twilight; but the darkness will soon be completely past, and the light will shine true and clear. Every thing will come to an end, that now en­feebles, straitens, or distresses us. Our knowledge will be unmixed with error; limited indeed, but ever enlarging. We shall see God and know God—“see him as he is,” and know him “even as we are known.” The consequence is, we shall be like God—like him in holiness, for we shall be “without spot or blemish”—like him in happiness, for we shall “enter into his joy”—like him in safety, and repose, for we shall receive “a kingdom which cannot be moved.” “Thou shalt call thy walls Salvation,” says Isaiah to the redeemed church, “and thy gates Praise. The sun shall be no more thy light by day, neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee; but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory. Thy sun shall no more go down, neither shall thy moon withdraw itself; for the Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended.” And what must that light be, which comes immediately from Jehovah’s throne? Look at the sun that he has fixed in the heavens; our feeble eyes cannot bear its splendour. In heaven, “they that be wise, shall shine forth as that sun.” And if a pardoned sinner is so glorious there with a borrowed lustre, who can measure the glory of him who is the Fountain of life, the source of all the light that ever shone?

2. And this light often breaks upon the soul when the soul looks not for it; *its blessedness comes in an unexpected hour. “*At evening time it shall be light;” in the evening, when we least look for light to come, when our hopes fail us, when we begin to fear that the twilight of a cloudy day will be succeeded by the thick dark­ness of a stormy night.

Let us think of this promise as we look on the dying Christian. We sometimes find it hard to believe that the blessed change which awaits him can be real. Can that helpless, sinking, withered frame, that “vile body,” be ever made like the glorious body of the Lord Jesus Christ? Can that soul which is now all gloom, or confusion, or insensibility, into which we strive in vain to pour one drop of consola­tion—can that soul, when a few more hours are past, be filled with all the unutterable joy of its Lord? Can a few short mo­ments carry my poor dying parent, or bro­ther, or child, or friend, from this dark room of mourning, into all the light of heaven? Yes; “in this evening time it shall be light.” O may the God of my fathers grant, that when my evening comes, it may be light with me!

We have now gone through this gracious promise. What use shall we make of it? If we make no other, *let it at least excite us to inquire whether we are the people con­cerned in it.* And to come to a faithful answer of this question, it is not enough that we remember the outward changes we have undergone—have we experienced any change within? We were “sometimes darkness;” ignorant of our lost condition, blind to the glory of Christ; desperately wicked, and yet trusting in our own righte­ousness; perishing, and yet thinking our­selves safe;—are we now “light in the Lord?” Do we see as we once saw not? Does the eternity which we once hardly thought of, now appear of tremendous importance in our sight? Is the value of the soul, is the way of salvation, is the pre­ciousness of the Saviour, revealed to us? Do we know Christ? Has God “shined into our hearts?” Is the day begun there? If we shrink from such questions as these, this scripture was never designed to comfort us; we have at present no part or lot in the consolation it affords. The light it speaks of will never shine on our dying bed, nor break on us in an eternal world. All there will be thick darkness and unbroken despair.

And must the sorrows of life end thus, brethren? Must its changes come to this mournful termination? O flee from this “wrath to come.” Near as you may be to it, you are called on to escape it; to ac­cept, instead of it, the salvation of heaven.

And this call comes not to you from ser­mons and ministers only; it is the voice of all the vicissitudes which befall you. Every trouble that grieves, and every mercy that gladdens you, is sent to you from heaven on the same errand, to remind you of a great Saviour and to bring you to his feet. Whether mourning or rejoicing, hoping or fearing, in sickness or in health, in trouble or in peace, this is the gracious call ever sounding in your ears, “Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.” “Give glory then to the Lord your God, before he cause darkness, and before your feet stumble upon the dark mountains; and while ye look for light, he turn it into the shadow of death, and make it gross darkness.”

If the light of grace has indeed begun to dawn within us, then let this scripture “sink down into our ears.” *Let the young and peaceful Christian remember it.* You love perhaps to hear of such consolations as these, but you do not feel any urgent need of them; and after dwelling on them for an hour, you are tempted to let them pass away from your memories, as though they concerned you not. But you will need them. Your sunshine will not go with you all the way to the grave. As surely as you are the children of Christ, so surely will he make you acquainted with “the days of darkness.” You know not how many of them may be your portion, nor how soon they may come. You know not what clouds may even now be gathering around your path; what fears, and dis­couragements, and temptations may be near at hand. Expect trials; prepare for them. Take unto you “the whole armour of God.” “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” Treasure up in your me­mory its precious promises. When trouble comes, let it find you ready, waiting to receiveand strengthened to endure it.

And what does this text say to you *who are beginning to be afflicted and tossed in your way to heaven?* It bids you put to yourselves the question of the troubled Job, “What, shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” Shall we take the comforts he has prepared for his children, and murmur at his corrections? He measures out to us good and evil, light and darkness, with infinite wisdom and love; and we must learn to receive both with equal thankfulness. There may be chan­ges and counterchanges in our lot; and what if there be? Through the power of the Holy Ghost they are subduing our cor­ruptions, exercising our graces, bringing us to a more simple dependence on our God. And he who sends them, marks them all, controls them all, and turns them all to one blessed end.

Rest satisfied, brethren, with this truth, that, however mysterious and perplexing many things within you and around you may seem, they are all parts of one and the same plan; that this plan is continually before the Lord; that it has been so from your cradle, and will be so to your grave; that he studied and arranged it in eternity, and in eternity will glorify himself for the grace which it displays. Your own lips shall praise him there—praise him, not merely for the love that formed you for himself, the Saviour who redeemed, the Spirit who sanc­tifies, and the heavenly consolations which refresh you, but praise him for the troubles which have brought you low, the conflicts which have made you tremble, the sorrows that have almost broken your heart, and the weakness that has subdued it. And the time is drawing nigh. The night is already “far spent, the day is at hand,” a cloudless, never-ending day. Let us look forward to it. Let us look at “the things which are not seen.” Let us think of them till, among all the changes and chances of this mortal life, we can say with the happy Paul, “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound; everywhere and in all things, I am instruct­ed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”