

SERMONS,

PREACHED IN

THE PARISH CHURCH OF GLASBURY,

BRECKNOCKSHIRE,

AND

ST. JAMES'S CHAPEL, CLAPHAM,

SURREY.

BY

THE REV. CHARLES BRADLEY,

VICAR OF GLASBURY.

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The Seventh Edition.

SERMON I.

THE CHRISTIAN IN THE WILDERNESS.

HOSEA II. 14, 15.—“Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her. And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope; and she shall sing there as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt.”

LITTLE as the Israelites were permanently benefited by their sufferings in the desert, they appear never to have forgotten them. Centuries passed away, but they still associated ideas of wretchedness with the scene of their fathers' wanderings. Hence “the wilderness” became another word among them for trouble and sorrow. It bears that meaning here. It signifies a state of desolation, a condition resembling in its difficulties and miseries the situation of afflicted Israel in the howling desert. Happy are they who are led by any means into any state, that discovers to them the meaning and truth of this gracious promise!

I. It points out to us, in the first instance, *the Author of affliction*. And he makes no attempt to conceal or disguise himself. On the contrary, he rather forces himself on our notice as the source of his people's troubles. It was the Assyrian army that laid Israel waste; it was the cruelty of her enemies, that desolated her country and carried her into a wretched captivity: but not a word is said in this chapter of man or his violence; the God of Israel seems determined to keep all but himself out of our sight. “I,” he says, “will take away my corn and my wine.” “I will destroy her vines and her fig-trees.” “I will cause all her mirth to cease.” “I will visit upon her the days of Baalim.” “I will bring her into the wilderness.”

Now why this anxiety in a God of love to stand thus forward as the author of misery, and misery, observe, among the people he loves the most? For two reasons; first, because we are so backward in affliction to discern his hand. We say indeed when it comes, “It is the work of God,” but we do not half believe what we say; we have no deep or lively impression of its truth. There is often lurking within us a conviction directly opposed to it. Else why that restless anxiety in trouble to look so closely into second causes? Why are our minds continually going over the circumstances that have led to our calamities? Why does one of us say, “Had this been let alone, my buried friend might have been spared?” And another, “Had that been done, my poor child might not have sunk?” And a third, “In any other situation, my withered health might have stood firm?” There may be some truth in all this, but the incessant dwelling of our minds on it shews how we

labour to push God out of our concerns, how unwilling we are in all situations to acknowledge or even perceive his hand.

But he has another reason for ascribing to himself our trials—we can get no good out of affliction, no real comfort under it, till we view it as sent to us from him. The man of the world regards affliction as “coming forth of the dust,” and trouble as “springing out of the ground.” It is the necessary result, he conceives, of our present condition and circumstances. And where is the benefit that he derives from sorrow? It works in him no submission, it brings out of him no praise. It is when the mind discovers God at the very root of its sufferings; when it sees him desolating its comforts and robbing it of its joys with his own hand; when every grave seems dug by him, and every loss and every pang are felt to be his work; when it cannot banish him from its thoughts, nor disconnect from him one of its griefs, nor even wish to do either—it is then that the soul begins to bethink itself, and the heart to soften, and man’s proud, rebellious, stubborn spirit to give way. Then the knee bends, and the prayer goes up, and the blessing comes down. Then, for the first time, we are quieted and subdued. “I was dumb,” said David, “and opened not my mouth, because thou didst it.” “It is the Lord,” said Eli, and then that poor old parent could add, “Let him do what seemeth him good.” And this conviction will carry us yet farther. Only let a man once see that a Father’s hand has mingled his cup of bitterness, and he will soon do more than say, “Shall I not drink it?” His heart may be half breaking, but there is something within that heart, which, ere he is aware, will force his lips to praise. “The Lord gave,” said Job, “and the Lord hath taken away;” and then comes this noble but yet natural exclamation, “Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

II. The text shows us next *why God afflicts us*; at least, it discovers to us one of the most frequent causes of our sorrows.

And this may appear to some of us too insignificant to produce the miseries which are ascribed to it. It is nothing more than forgetfulness of God, and that not in his judgments, but in his mercies; a failing to recognize his hand in them.

Look to the eighth verse of this chapter. “She did not know,” says God, “that I gave her corn, and wine, and oil; and multiplied her silver and gold.” She knew it indeed, but she did not remember it; she did not practically acknowledge it; she did not act, she did not feel, as though God had any thing to do with her blessings; she accordingly “prepared them for Baal;” she devoted them to her lusts and her idols. “Therefore,” he adds, “will I return, and take away my corn and my wine.” And again in the thirteenth verse, “She went after her lovers, and forgot me, saith the Lord; therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness.”

Not one word, brethren, need I say to convince some of you, that God acts thus still. You have lost some of your earthly mercies, perhaps your best; those which you valued more than Israel ever valued her wine and her oil, or you ever valued your silver and gold; and lost them too, it may be, in some unexpected hour or manner. Your neighbours can hardly tell why God has thus stepped out of the ordinary path of his providence to deprive you of them, or why he has deprived you of them at all. They speak of “his way being in the sea, and his path in the great waters, and his footsteps,” they say, “are not known.” But you use no such language. In your view of them, there is not an atom of mystery in his dealings with you. You know why he has stripped you bare, as well as though his own voice had sounded it from heaven in your ears. You had forgotten him in his gifts. You loved them so well, and prized them so highly, and leant on them so confidently, and drew out of them so much help, so much comfort and sweetness, that at last you deemed them all-sufficient, you allowed them to lead away your heart from God; you not only forgot him in them, but you forgot, in the enjoyment of them, that you needed any thing beyond them; you tried to live “without God in the world.” God saw this, and he would not suffer it. In jealousy for his own honour, in love for your souls, he withdrew the gifts you had abused. He made you feel once again that you need him; that no one can possibly need him more; that if he takes from you all that is his, you stand as starving beggars in his universe, you have nothing left, save that which you cannot get rid of, misery and sin.

And you who are still encompassed with earthly blessings, learn here how easily they may be lost. If the perversion of them forfeits them, if not to discover and own God in them endangers them, which of you as he thinks of his health, his reason, his property, and the use he has made of them, has not reason to fear? Which of you as he looks around on his children and friends, has not reason to tremble? God will not deprive you of them without a cause. No; he would not rob needlessly the meanest creature that breathes, of the meanest joy. But he must and he will be acknowledged by all his creatures in all his mercies. If you will not see him in the enjoyment of them, he will make you see him in their loss. He will lay bare his arm and snatch them away: and, mark, not when they are worn out, or cease to be useful, or you are grown weary of them; but at a time and in a manner that will startle you, and compel you to trace their removal to his hand. “I will take away my corn,” he says, “in the time thereof; and my wine in the season thereof.” “My gifts shall be withdrawn, when my people least expect to lose them, when they are just stretching forth their hand to grasp them, when they are most of all the objects of their love, and expectation, and joy.”

III. We learn further in the text *how God sometimes afflicts us*. It describes him as doing it gradually, compassionately, tenderly. “I will allure her,” he says, “and bring her into the wilderness;” not drive her thither, not force her there; but I will go before her and lead her on, and make her willing to enter the dreary waste.”

This however is not always God’s way of acting. Sometimes his judgments appear to come on his defenceless people with the suddenness of lightning and the violence of the hurricane. But who are these on whom he thus rushes like an armed man? Generally the strongest, if not the holiest, of his saints; men of powerful minds and naturally of unusually proud hearts, and yet men of great experience in the ways of godliness; tried, weather-beaten Christians; men who require a hard blow, and know how to get strength to bear one; men who have learnt much of God’s mercy, and want now to be taught, the last thing that man ever learns, God’s sovereignty. Or else they are men of great sins, or intended for great usefulness, great honour and a great reward—a David, or a Job, or a Paul.

But take the young and inexperienced of Christ’s flock, he carries them into the wilderness in his arms. A mother’s tenderness could not equal his. There is no describing it as it manifests itself towards them on their entrance into trouble. He does not deceive them; he tells them plainly that they are going and must go into tribulation, that there is no other way to his kingdom; but he reasons with them, he persuades them. He shows them how much they need affliction, how much good they will derive from it, how near it will bring them to him, and how much it will make them like him, what heavenly consolations he has provided for them under it, and with what unspeakable joy he will bring them out of it, how glorious the kingdom, and inheritance, and rest, to which it leads. And then when the blow is at last struck, he is so mindful of their weakness, so alive to their fears, letting the weight of sorrow fall on them so gently, and putting into them so much strength to bear it, and mingling with it so much undisguised and unexpected mercy, that the men are in the very thick of the wilderness almost before they discover that they have taken in it a single step. They go down into it, if not as cheerfully as though it were a paradise, yet so willingly, that there is not a paradise to be found on the earth, that could tempt them to turn away from it. Other men are driven into the wilderness, nothing can reconcile them to it; the Christian is allured thither. Like Moses, he “chooses” affliction. Like David, he says, “It is good for me.” Like his divine Master, he would not rush out of it even if he could. Nature may shrink for a moment, it may almost rebel, nay, it may quite rebel, and that for far longer than moments or hours, but nature does not triumph; the man prays it down. He places himself at last as a child in his Father’s hands, and so that he is there and knows that he is there, he is content. Among all the

people of God in this suffering world, there is not one who would not prefer the dreariest path in the dreariest desert with Christ by his side, and the consolations of Christ in his heart, to the brightest and most joyous of all earthly scenes without him.

IV. We have now followed the Christian into the wilderness. Consider, in the next place, *the comfort the Lord imparts to him there.*

He says of Israel, "I will speak comfortably unto her." But this is not the exact rendering of the words; we must go for that to the margin of our Bibles. We read there, "I will speak to her heart." And how exquisitely natural as well as touching is this language! None but a man in affliction, or a God who knows what is in man in affliction, would have thought of it. Others speak comfortably to us in sorrow, but if that sorrow is deep, what power have their words? In most cases, they have none. They may be kind words and right words, they may deserve our gratitude and have it, we may feel ashamed of ourselves that they have so little of it; but they can no more get to our hearts when God has really wounded them, than they can restore our blessings or raise our dead. It is amazing how completely barred in these seasons the soul often feels itself against all that can be said to it. The wisest reasonings, the most earnest and touching persuasions, can gain no access. They are no more to us than the whistling wind. They are rather a weariness than a relief; they distract the head without easing the heart. Nay, what have our Bibles themselves sometimes been? As powerless as our neighbours. "What a comfort must this blessed book prove now to that poor sufferer," says a Christian friend, as his own quiet soul is drawing consolation out of it; but the fact perhaps is, the book lies beside that man for hours unopened, and when it is taken up, he wonders where its power and sweetness are gone.

And how long does all this last? Just long enough to show us that there is no comforter but God; just long enough to make us feel our own utter helplessness, and the poverty and nothingness of every thing around us. It lasts till we are forced to lift up a wretched, half-despairing cry to heaven for consolation; and then what follows? O, brethren, that every one of you could tell! The power to tell would be cheaply purchased by a few sighs and tears: yes, by some of you at a price that you would tremble to pay. God now speaks. He spake indeed before by the friends he sent to us and by his word, but then it was to the ear; at the best, to the understanding; he speaks now to the heart. And could the wondering mourner show you what his words have done there, you would say of such a mourner, and say it of him while in the wilderness, in the very depth of his tribulation, "O that my soul were in his soul's stead! "The great Comforter of the church has vindicated his honour; he has taught the soul whence its consolations must

come, if they come at all; and now they are poured into it with the tenderness of a Father and the omnipotence of a God. Now every thing comforts it, for God speaks by every thing. A word affects it. And as for the Bible, no tongue can tell the eagerness with which its promises are embraced, or the solace they impart. So powerful is it become, that perhaps one declaration in it is the stay of the soul for days or weeks. The man says, "Were that one text the whole of my Bible, did I find nothing more in it to comfort me than I find there, it would be enough: I could not be wretched."

V. But consolation is not all that an immortal spirit needs in sorrow. Our attention is called therefore, in the next place, to *the supplies which God furnishes in tribulation*. He represents himself as more than a Comforter in it; he is a Benefactor and a rich one. We are promised vineyards in the wilderness, and these vineyards our own. "I will give her her vineyards from thence."

Now by this language we are to understand, not always or generally a restoration of the blessings we have lost, but such blessings as will abundantly supply their place, and, at the same time, exactly meet our necessities and our wishes also, in that state of destitution into which we are brought. And they are blessings too that in some sense or other God deems our own. He considers that we have a property in them, for in a very marked manner he calls them ours. And not without reason. They are blessings that were set aside for us in the ages of eternity by sovereign grace; they have been purchased for us by the blood of Christ; they are secured to us by a solemn and never failing covenant. We have no natural claim to them, no power in ourselves to take hold of or retain for a moment any one of them; but they are all become as completely and eternally ours, as infinite goodness, as infinite

faithfulness and power, can make them. We know what they are; not those poor mercies that we faintly ask for in our hours of ease, but those higher mercies, for which the soul in its misery most aches, and which the heart, when its desires are drawn forth in affliction by heavenly consolations, most thirsts for and seeks—support, patience, submission; thankfulness for the past, all the past; quietness for the future; deeper convictions of the world's emptiness, of the misery of sin, of the worth of the soul, of the Saviour's preciousness; the giving way of evil desires and habits, and the rising up of holy affections; prostration and, at the same time, freedom and elevation of spirit; thoughts ascending to heaven and almost piercing into it; a close, and realizing, and wonderfully blessed view of eternal things; the light of God's countenance; a sense of his presence.

And how strange an origin is ascribed to these blessings! And how strange the scene of our enjoyment of them! We have naturally no concep-

tion of being satisfied and happy in bereavements and troubles. How should we? We know nothing of any happiness save that which the objects around us give; and whence, when these wither away, is our happiness to flow? We can conceive of patience in affliction, of support and even of some degree of consolation there; but as for the heart being filled, as for its strongest desires being all gratified and the soul content—we can give credit to no such representations; we say at once that we might as well look for the light of day at midnight. This text however speaks of “vineyards” in a wilderness; not of corn and oil, observe, the necessaries of life in an eastern land, but of wine, its refreshment and gladness; and this to be found and this to be enjoyed, where nothing of the kind could be looked for, where the ordinary traveller expects only desolation; amidst the barrenness and famine of a desert. And more still—these blessings are not only to be ours in affliction, they are actually to be the fruits of affliction, to grow out of it, to be produced by those very things which cause our sorrow. “I will give her her vineyards from thence.” “The wilderness which is the source of Israel’s sufferings, shall be the source of her consolations also and joys. They are my gifts, and that she may see them to be mine, she shall gather them, not in her own fertile country, but on the arid sand.”

And representations like these are of frequent occurrence in scripture. Half its promises are promises of blessings in sorrow and blessings from sorrow. It speaks of joy in tribulation; of consolations abounding when sufferings abound; of patience, experience, and every Christian grace, all wrought by trouble, all made to flow by the power of the Holy Ghost from tribulation alone. It goes farther. That eternal blessedness which is the purchase of the Redeemer’s blood, the perfection of Jehovah’s workmanship, the noblest creation of his power and the richest gift of his goodness—the scripture traces even this to suffering, and to slight suffering; it describes it as sorrow’s easy, rapid work. “Our light affliction,” says the troubled Paul, “which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.” We must not, I know, overrate affliction, but with such a declaration as this before us, how can we overrate it? Powerless as it may be in itself, how can we ascribe more to it when in the Spirit’s hands, than that Holy Spirit has ascribed to it here? He gives it the praise even of the happiness of heaven. We must be in heaven perhaps before we can echo with our full feeling such words as these, but some of you can tell us that the brightest hours on earth are those which sorrow brightens. Your richest supplies, your sweetest comforts, have been sent you in your deepest troubles. For you “the wilderness and the solitary place have been glad, and the desert has rejoiced and blossomed as the rose.” You have had your vineyards in the desert and from the desert. Its barren ground has been the ground of all others where you have been most blessed. In looking back on

your earthly pilgrimage, in going over the years during which you have trod its wastes, you are constrained to say, you rejoice to say, "My most afflicted path has been my happiest. I have been restless, half miserable, in the day of my seeming happiness, but in the day of my adversity I have been tranquil, I have been satisfied, I have sung for joy."

VI. But the text still carries us on. It bids us notice *the hope that God excites in affliction*, "I will give her," he says, "the valley of Achor for a door of hope."

Now this valley was situated at the very entrance of the promised land. It bordered on the wilderness, and was the first part of Canaan that came into the possession of Israel. Hence it must have seemed to them, after their wearisome sojournings, as the birthplace of hope; their hearts must have glowed as they entered it, with the prospect of soon obtaining for their own the whole land. And here we have a clue to the prophet's meaning.

"My people shall not remain for ever in that wilderness," says God. "I led them there, and I am blessing them there, and they shall be blessed; but that is not their home. I will show them a way out of the wilderness, and that not a way which will take them back again into Egypt, to the scene of their former sins and wretchedness; it shall bring them to Achor; they shall find themselves sooner or later on the borders of their promised inheritance.

And there is an Achor for you, Christian brethren. Some of you well know that there is, for you have found it. You remember the time when heaven seemed as far from you, as the divine justice or your own guilt could remove it. Your hearts often longed to see that it would eventually be yours, but you could not. You reasoned, you "took counsel with your soul," you tried all the means you could think of to work in yourselves a conviction of your eternal safety, but all failed you. The utmost you could ever attain, was a hope fluctuating with the feeling of every day, and often scarcely to be distinguished from positive despair. That was the time of your worldly ease and prosperity. At last came trouble. You saw the wilderness before you; you found yourselves in it. "Now," you said, "my misery is sealed. My strength and my hope is perished from the Lord." But when you had been awhile in the desert; when God had spoken comfortably to you there, and began to pour into your wounded hearts his wine and his oil; when you saw that you did not sink as you expected to sink, but that, on the contrary, you experienced a consolation and blessedness you never knew before; then, for the first time, you rose above the fears that all your life long had oppressed you. You rose almost above your supports and comforts. You looked beyond them. You said with Manoah, "If the Lord had been pleased to destroy me, he would not have showed me such things as these." The sins he subdued in you, the graces he quickened, the com-

passion and tenderness he manifested, the discoveries he gave you of his favour, appeared to you in their true character, as indications of his special love. As you ate of the vineyards of the wilderness, you regarded them as the forerunners of the feast of heaven. "Tribulation worketh patience," says St. Paul, "and patience experience, and experience hope;" and you have at last learned to say the same. "It is good," you now say, "that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord." "Thou which hast showed me great and sore troubles, shalt quicken me again, and shalt bring me up again from the depths of the earth. Thou shalt increase my greatness, and comfort me on every side." "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterwards receive me to glory."

And what has been the design of God in all he has done for you? in the comforts he has bestowed, the supplies he has given, and the hope he has inspired? The text will tell you.

VII. Notice in it, lastly, *the effect to be produced on Israel by the mercies vouchsafed to her*. "She shall sing there," says God, "as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt." "A song of joy," we perhaps say. Yes, of such joy as few ever feel out of the wilderness of trouble. But there is something more than joy in this song, and something higher.

The Lord here reminds us of the hour when Israel saw herself free and safe on the borders of the Red Sea. Her enemies were engulfed in its waters, and she herself was on her way to Canaan. That was the day of her youth. He then refers us to that exulting hymn with which she made the shores of that sea re-echo on the discovery of her deliverance. I need not say that it is a hymn of wonderful beauty and fervour. But the most striking peculiarity of it, I conceive, is the high strain of adoration which it breathes. The people seem overwhelmed with the display that has been made to them of the divine perfections, and under the influence of the admiration which these perfections had excited, their joy is almost lost in feelings of adoration and praise. True they do say, "The Lord hath saved us;" it is true that they speak of him as their song because he had been their salvation; but the chief burden of their strain is "the high praise of their God." "Sing ye to the Lord," they cry and cry again, "for he hath triumphed gloriously." "Thy right hand, O Lord, is become glorious in power." "Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like thee? glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders."

Now if you have experienced great consolations, great mercies, in affliction, be assured of this, that they have elevated unspeakably your thoughts of God; that they have been accompanied with such a view of his glory, as delights, and warms, and almost fires, your soul. You cannot be

silent concerning it. You have seen your “King in his beauty,” and you must speak of your King and his beauty. He has opened your lips, and you must “show forth his praise.” “He has put a new song in your mouth,” and you must send it forth, “even a thanksgiving unto your God.”

You remember the feelings of your hearts, brethren, on your first conversion to God; how strong they were; what influence they had on your feelings, your words, and conduct. You remember too how mournfully they half subsided away. When God brings you into trials, and helps and comforts you under them, he does it to revive those feelings of your better days, to make you in zeal and love what you were years ago, and perhaps have never been since. “I remember thee,” he says, “the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals.” He wants that love again, and he wants it for this purpose, that you may answer the great end of all he has done for you, that you may “show forth his praise.” If then this end has been in no degree attained, if you have talked of the spiritual supports and enjoyments you have known in adversity, and yet are come out of it as worldly-minded, as cold-hearted, as trifling, as little impressed with the divine goodness and glory, as when you entered it, tremble for yourselves, tremble for every one like yourselves. There is a matter far more important to you and to me, brethren, than earthly trials, or any consolations we can experience under them. We are approaching an eternal world; we are on our way to the judgment-seat of the living God. God will not ask us there, what afflictions we have endured, or what comforts we have enjoyed under them. No; the question there will be, what have we been in our joys and our sorrows? his friends or his enemies? While we have been experiencing his supporting mercy, what have we experienced of the cleansing of a Saviour’s blood and a Saviour’s Spirit? What have we known as great sinners of the great Deliverer? Compared with enquiries like these, the things you have heard today are trifles. O forget them all, rather than forget this one awful fact—we are dying sinners, drawing nearer and nearer every moment to an eternal heaven or an eternal hell.