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BY

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SERMON IV.

THE COMPLAINT OF ST. PAUL.

ROMANS VII. 24.—“O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”

WE are all familiar with the language of complaint. We hear it wherever we go. Scarcely a day passes, in which it does not proceed from our own lips. But how little do we think of the sin that is mixed up with our complaints! Could we see them in their real character, we should number many of them among our greatest follies and heaviest iniquities. Here however in this text, is one of a holy and blessed character. Happy would it be for us, if every other were silenced among us; if no lamentation were ever heard in our houses and chambers save this alone!

It suggests three particulars for our consideration—first, the person who makes it; secondly, the evil he deplures in it; and, thirdly, the effects which this evil produced on him.

I. “Of whom then,” we may ask in the first instance, “speaketh the apostle this? Of himself, or of some other man?” “Not of himself,” some will tell us, “nor of any sincere Christian. He is speaking in the person of a sinner whom God has compelled to feel the burden and power of his corruptions, but in whose mind the love of sin still reigns. We are to regard his words as a complaint extorted, in an hour of thoughtfulness, from a man struggling at once with an enlightened conscience and an ungodly heart.” But a single glance at the preceding part of the chapter confutes this interpretation. Whoever he may be that is speaking in it, he says in one place, “I would do good;” in another, “I delight in the law of God:” and surely these are expressions which never yet came with truth from unhallowed lips, that never could come from any but a renewed heart. Besides, this complaint itself marks the character of him who uttered it. It designates one hating sin in a very extraordinary degree, and striving against it with every power of his soul; and Paul himself was a man of this class. We infer therefore that the apostle is describing his own feelings in this passage, and consequently right feelings, exactly those feelings which, in a world like this, we should expect to find in a partially renewed mind.

And we must not attempt to turn away the force of his language by referring it to some early period of his life, or some former stage of his Christian experience. He evidently alludes to an evil that was distressing him at the time he wrote. It is not Saul, the persecutor, who sends forth this cry of

wretchedness; not Saul on the ground in the road to Damascus; no, nor yet Saul listening in his blindness to the teaching of Ananias; it is Paul, the servant of Jesus Christ; Paul, the chosen and beloved apostle; Paul, the champion, and bulwark, and glory, of the whole Christian church.

And he speaks here not merely as a Christian, but as a very experienced Christian; as one arrived at a state of rare maturity in grace, a state in which sin appears to the mind, as it appears to the divine mind, an intolerable evil, a thing so hateful, that the very remains of it are not to be endured; they must be got rid of, at all events they must be controlled and counteracted, or the heart will break.

And the holiest amongst you, brethren, will be the most willing to take this view of the text, and never so ready to look at it in this light, as in your holiest hours. You read here nothing that surprises you. On the contrary, you deem these words some of the plainest and most natural the Bible contains. If you must wonder at all, you only wonder that any moment should ever go over any one man, in which he is not taking them as his own.

We see then already one use that we are to make of this complaint. It is laid before us as a touchstone whereby we may try the reality of our own personal religion, and a standard by which we may measure its extent.

II. Our next subject of enquiry is the ground of it, *the evil it deplures*.

This undoubtedly is sin, and sin apart from any punishment the apostle either felt on account of it, or dreaded. He does not cry out like a criminal tortured on the rack to which his crimes have brought him. He does not say with Cain, "My punishment is greater than I can bear;" nor with the rich man in the parable, "I am tormented in this flame." It is sin itself, that grieves him.

Nor again, like the suffering David, is he bewailing some enormous transgression that has exposed him to shame, and weakened his trust in the divine mercy. The man's life was blameless. It was so upright and consistent, that the Holy Spirit has not recorded of him, from the day of his conversion to the hour of his death, one mistake or crime.

And herein lies the peculiarity of his language—he complains of sin as sin; of sin that he knew to be pardoned; of sin too within him; of that which no eye saw, but the workings of which his soul deeply felt. He mourns over inward corruption, the loathsome and intolerable iniquity of the heart,

"And did this exist," it may be asked, "in the holy Paul?" It did, brethren, and there is not a single heart out of heaven, in which it does not exist; there is not a godly heart out of heaven, in which it is not felt. Men talk of perfection, talk of it with their feet on this vile earth and breathing its tainted air; but poor indeed are such men's views of holiness, and dark indeed their knowledge of their God. Their perfection is a dream of ignorance. It is nothing better than a blind man's landscape or a deaf man's song.

The apostle calls this inward corruption by various names. It is sometimes "the law of sin;" at other times, "the body of sin;" here it is "a body of death." He terms it "a body," to give us an idea of the mass of it he felt within him, the strength and extent of its influence; and he speaks of it as "a body of death," because, in its tendency, it leads to death, and, when allowed its full scope, ends in death. He intimates, in this expression, what another apostle plainly asserts, that "sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death." We are reminded by it of nothing less than this, that every one of us is carrying about in him that which can destroy him. There are still in the holiest heart, the elements, not of mischief only, but of utter ruin, the seeds of total and irretrievable misery.

And though checked, this evil principle still shows its mortal tendency. It often paralyzes even the renewed soul. It chills within it that divine life which God himself has implanted, suspending or clogging its operations and marring its enjoyments. No elevation of character can lift us above its reach, no heavenly wisdom can always baffle its assaults, no attainments in holiness can neutralize its power. The heart which has been chosen, and consecrated, and long dwelt in, as the temple of God; the heart bearing the image of Jehovah and well nigh meet for his kingdom; the heart warm with the love of heaven and expanding with a foretaste of its joys; even such a heart as this, an evil within itself can sometimes half wither, and make it, through many a mournful hour, in its feelings, and affections, and almost all its workings, like the heart that has never once felt the regenerating hand of God, that has Satan still for its lord and his misery for its end.

The operations of this remaining depravity are manifold and unceasing. We cannot look into our minds without tracing them.

It discovers itself in *evil thoughts*. These the Christian hates; he would bar them out from his soul, yet they come, and come almost every hour, and come in crowds, and never perhaps in crowds so great, as when he wishes them the farthest away. Some of them undoubtedly come from without; they must be traced to Satan; but most of them are inborn. They arise naturally and spontaneously within us, just as noxious weeds spring up in their native climate and soil.

And then how many and strong are the *evil desires* which spring out of these evil thoughts! They are not fostered in the believer's mind; he abhors them; it is the business of his life to subdue them and root them up; but where is the man, however elevated in spirit, whom they do not infest? And how can it be otherwise? With a void ever aching within us; with capabilities of happiness never yet satisfied; surrounded, at the same time, by objects congenial to our earth-born nature, adapted to its propensities and offering to gratify them; with every sense an open inlet to temptation, and every appetite and passion ready to welcome it; carrying about with us a hungry soul in a

world crowded with that which looks like food for it, while the real materials of its happiness are at a distance from it, out of its sight, and, as feeling often tells us, out of its reach;—is it wonderful, brethren, that, in such a situation, our hearts sometimes go wrong? Is it wonderful that the desires we would raise up to heaven, often cleave to the dust? Is it not rather wonderful that we are able at any time to get above the allurements that surround us, and more than this, to give the warmest and strongest of our longings to an unseen God?

And think too of *the evil tempers* that still assail us—envy, anger, jealousy, party-spirit, and many more. We ought long since to have done with these low feelings, and there are moments when we are ready to think them clean gone from us for ever, but, before we are aware, they rise again into action, and amaze and confound us by their strength. How often and how painfully have some of us felt their influence! We have gone into the society of our fellow-men calm and cheerful, with the law of love on our tongue and no emotion opposed to it in our heart; but how have we left it? Humbled and ashamed. Some evil temper has been set at work, and destroyed at once every kind and every peaceful feeling. It has occasioned a tumult within us, which we have hardly known how to conceal or bear. We have returned to our homes disgusted with the world, and still more disgusted with ourselves; ready to wish for a solitude where no human being shall ever again be found to excite our corruptions, or be the spectator of our weakness. And what has caused this change? The veriest trifle; a word or look, or the absence of a word or look; a provocation so minute, that we could scarcely define it; a thing so contemptible, that we despise ourselves for giving it a feeling or a thought.

There is yet another way in which our corruption works—*it hinders much of the good we aim at; and the good which it cannot hinder it pollutes.*

When our hearts begin to warm with the love of Christ, and new purposes are formed of more entire devotedness to his blessed service, it opposes sloth to feeling; it calls up selfishness to reason down our plans of mercy; it throws a chill over the kindling affections; and, instead of the career of zeal and usefulness we had marked out for ourselves, we once again lie down in the torpor of a shameful ease.

And then when we are actually at work for God, think of the unworthy motives that are generally at work also. How often are we aiming only at earthly honour and applause! and how more often still are we wishing to share with the Lord Jehovah in the honour that is his alone!

And go with us into our chambers. O the sin that besets us there! We dare not cease to pray; we know that death would follow madness like that; but what are our prayers? Many of them as trifling and heartless as though the living God were an idol, or we needed no longer either his help or his mercy.

There are times too when we cannot pray at all. Our bewildered minds refuse their office. Our thoughts wander to the ends of the earth. The hour that we hoped would be spent in communion with heaven, is passed in nothingness, or in that which is worse. “When I would do good,” says the apostle, “evil is present with me,” and there is not a servant of Christ among us all, who does not often feel it, in a greater or less degree, to be present with him.

III. Let us now pass on to a third point—*the effects produced on St. Paul by the inward pollution he bewails.*

He mentions two of these.

1. *It made him wretched.* And nothing else could do this. He suffered more in his Master’s cause than any before or any after him, and yet not a complaint or sigh could his sufferings wring from him. Of poverty and want, of toil and peril, of contempt and persecution, he said, “None of these things move me;” nay, he tells us that he actually “took pleasure” in these things, he gloried and exulted in them, because they were laid upon him for Christ’s sake. But now look at this heroic sufferer. He is groaning with misery. Sin has done what neither scourgings, nor imprisonments, nor stonings, nor shipwrecks, ever could do—it has beaten him down. He cannot bear it. The least remains of it are a burden too heavy for him to stand under; they goad him even to impatience.

The most obvious sense we can put on his words carries us thus far, but it is generally supposed that the idea of misery is conveyed in this text in a yet stronger manner. It was the dreadful practice, we are told, of some ancient tyrants, to punish any unfortunate object of their displeasure by binding to him the lifeless body of a fellow-creature, a dead carcass to a living man; and then compelling him to bear it about with him to his constant horror and wretchedness. To a situation like this, St. Paul is thought, in this passage, to compare his own. He feels himself, while burdened with sin, like an unhappy captive carrying about a loathsome and intolerable weight, and exclaims in the anguish of his tortured spirit, “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”

And similar to this is the light in which every real believer looks on sin. He regards it as a detestable object. It pains and distresses him. Nothing distresses him like it. It is the one main sorrow of his life. Take this away from him, and then place him where you may, and heap on him what you will, he is a happy man. “How great then,” it may be said, “is the difference between him and others!” Brethren, it is great, far deeper and far more extensive than many of you conceive; but in no respect is it so marked as in this, in the griefs of the Christian, in the objects over which he most bitterly mourns.

Look around this congregation. We are all more or less the children of sorrow: there is not one of us, who has not within him some known or secret

cause of disquietude. Now bring a messenger from heaven, and let him ask each one of us what sorrow he shall take from us, what spring of grief in our breasts he shall close, how various, could we speak out, would be our answers! But yet there are men here who would cry aloud with one voice for one evil to be removed. That evil would be sin, and among those men, however few in number, would every one of us be found, who is on his way to heaven. Would we really know whither we are going? Would we know without self-delusion or mistake, our character in the sight of God? Then let each one of us ask himself, What makes me most wretched? What do I deem the greatest affliction of my life? Over what, during the last week, or month, or year, have I most frequently and heavily mourned? Is it sickness, pain, or poverty? Is it the loss of this friend or that child? Is it my baffled schemes and blighted prospects? Is it mortified vanity, or disappointed hope, or wounded, or thwarted, or stifled affection? Or is it St. Paul's great sorrow? Is it the Christian's one great affliction—sin? the sin of my heart, the pollution of my soul?

2. And this sorrow in the mind of the apostle, was not a mere feeling, a sentimental grief which he took a pleasure and almost a pride in indulging. It was so bitter, that *it compelled him to look about for deliverance from the evil that occasioned it.*

When he was unjustly imprisoned by the magistrates at Philippi, we find him in no haste to be released from his fetters. "They have sent to let you go," said the keeper of the prison to him, "now therefore depart, and go in peace." "Nay verily," answered he, "they have beaten us openly uncondemned, and have cast us into prison, and now do they thrust us out privily? Let them come themselves and fetch us out." But from his indwelling corruptions, he was impatient to be released. Here there is no waiting, no standing on form, no indifference. Like a wretched prisoner who is panting in his dungeon for the air and the light, he cries aloud, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me?"

It is evident at once, that this effort to get free from sin is no common thing. Nothing is more remote from the ordinary workings of our nature. Even in cases where the pollution of the heart is admitted as a fact and in words deplored, it is not always nor generally that this struggle for deliverance follows. On the contrary, a quite different effect is often manifested. The ungodly man takes courage in sin from the very consideration of his sinfulness. He makes use of his corruption as an opiate to his fears. "I am frail," he says. "I carry about with me a weak and fallen nature. The God who will be my Judge, knows my weakness, and will make allowances for it. He will not punish severely those delinquencies to which such a nature as mine must be liable; he will never call me to a strict account for the sins into which

I am thus instinctively and, as I feel, irresistibly led.” Poor, miserable sophistry! but not too miserable to be heard and echoed every day in this foolish world. It finds an excuse for guilt in the magnitude of guilt. It pleads the baseness of the heart as an excuse for the criminality of the life. “There is poison in the fountain,” it says. “If I did not put it there, I will foster it there. None of it shall be taken away. And then who can lay to my charge the poison in the streams?”

And take another man, or take any man whom God the Holy Ghost has not renewed. Tell him, brethren, that you will remove from him all that is evil; that you will deprive him of every pursuit, and amusement, and feeling, which has what the Bible calls sin mixed up with it; that you will leave him going about the world pure as an angel. Does he thank you? No. He feels that you are threatening to rob him. There is not a thought of happiness within him, there is not a pleasure he enjoys or hopes for, there is not a vision of delight he cherishes, which sin does not gild and brighten; not one which can be separated from sin without being marred. He has a depraved nature, and in nothing but that which is congenial to his nature, which has more or less of depravity mingled with it, can he delight.

But turn to the man of God. He has a new nature, and this new nature is like the Being from whom it comes, holy, and heavenly, and divine. It consequently delights in things assimilated to itself, in holy things. And in proportion as it delights in these, it finds sin opposed to its happiness. Sin is unsuited to its taste; it stands in the way of its operations and gratifications; it fetters, and depresses, and pains it. The consequence is, the soul most anxiously wishes to have done with the accursed thing; and this wish gradually gains such strength, that it becomes at last one of its most constant and powerful feelings. It sighs for freedom as it never sighed for any thing else. It longs for deliverance from sin as much as from hell itself. In its estimation, sin is hell, and wherever sin is, “There,” it says, “are all the elements of all misery.” Open wide the door of heaven to a man of this stamp, tell him that he may be admitted into its regions of glory with all his evil desires and passions raging within him, could you silence, brethren, that man’s cry? could you stop that man’s prayer for deliverance? Not for one moment. He would still exclaim, “O wretched man that I am!” He would still ask, “Who shall deliver me?” His language would still be, “When shall this desperately wicked heart be cleansed? When shall these vile corruptions cease to vex me? How long must I bear this loathsome, intolerable burden? I am in a holy world, but O for some world that will make me holy! This bright heaven serves only to show me more of my dark pollution, and to aggravate my misery. O that I had wings like a dove, for then would I flee away, flee away to any world or any scene where I might escape from my hated lusts, where I might find holiness, and be at rest!”

From this strong desire after holiness, arises much of that peculiarity of character which marks the Christian. It separates him from the world;—it must separate him from it, for it is an evil world. It makes him a man of self-denial, watchfulness, and prayer. His religion ceases to be a round of forms, or a set of opinions, or a code of decencies; it takes the character of a warfare. There is an unceasing conflict kept up within him between his propensities and his duties, between sin and grace; more than a desire for victory over his lusts, more than a stinging and struggling of his conscience after the indulgence of them; there is a prevailing effort to be holy; there is a daily “keeping under of the body,” a daily “crucifixion of the flesh,” a daily “walking in the Spirit.” And this goes on to the man’s dying hour. It ends only with his life.

Brethren, what know we of this spiritual conflict? Has it ever been begun in us? Is it going on now?

We have thus far followed the apostle; and if we have not misinterpreted his words, it is clear from them, that *there is something in the nature of sin inconceivably dreadful,*

I allude not to the hold it has on the human mind, the firmness with which it strikes its roots into it, and the resistance it offers to every attempt to dislodge it, though, in this view, we can hardly contemplate it without a shudder: I refer to the power it possesses of inflicting misery. Weakened, counteracted, subdued, it yet threw the holy Paul into an agony, it made him groan with wretchedness. And it did this while he was abounding in faith and hope, and on his way to heaven. What then will it do with some of us? If thus powerful and tormenting in its weakness, what must it be in its strength? If thus dreadful while in a holy heart in a world of mercy, O what unutterable anguish will it inflict on every other heart in its own world, a world of wrath! God will leave it alone there. It will have the mastery over the whole soul, with nothing to resist its power, or tolerate its misery, or put an end to its existence. We tremble at the thought of the “devouring fire,” we shudder at the never dying worm; that worm is sin, that fire is the love of sin, matured, triumphant, free.

We learn also here, that *the salvation of a sinner is an act of pure goodness.*

Throughout this epistle, St. Paul has been labouring to establish this point. He has shown that the righteousness which justifies, must be a perfect righteousness, and that man, having no such righteousness to plead, must be justified altogether by grace or not at all. And now comes a most convincing close to his reasoning. He brings himself before us, and lays himself bare. And what do we see in him? A warfare that almost breaks his heart; sin not only tempting him from without, but dwelling in him, adhering to his inmost soul. A perfect righteousness? O no!—an evil that he deploras as he deploras

nothing else. And when he begins to praise, for what do we hear him bless God? As a sinner for a Saviour. He finds in Christ Jesus his only solace and joy. Brethren, if at the close of an eventful life, after all his faithful labours, and painful sacrifices, and splendid services, this apostle could find no hope of salvation, no rest for his soul, but in the free grace of a pardoning God, of what possible avail can our fancied righteousness prove to any of us? This text blasts at once all the expectations we have grounded on it, all our lofty hopes. It tears them up by the roots, and as we strive to throw them from us, it makes us ashamed of the folly that ever cherished them.

We learn also here, that *the life of a Christian must necessarily be a chequered life.*

Some of us perhaps look on it, so far at least as religion influences it, as a life of unbroken sorrow; others regard it as one unvarying scene of peace and joy. It is neither. Our mistakes arise from our taking a partial view of it, or rather from our inability to comprehend the mysterious way in which its joys and its sorrows, its complaints and its songs, are blended with each other. They appear inconsistent. Nothing but a heart-felt experience of the power of godliness can cause them to appear otherwise. But look at this apostle. He mingles together, we see, his sorrows and his joys. One moment he cries, "O wretched man that I am!" the next, he breaks off from the language of bewailing, and gives utterance to feelings of a directly opposite character; "I thank God," he says, "through Jesus Christ our Lord." He complains of himself, and he rejoices in Christ, almost at the same instant. He is comforted in the very midst of his wretchedness. Nay, in one sense, he owes his comfort to his wretchedness. It sends him to his God. It brings him near that blessed Comforter, in whom is treasured up a suitable, and ready, and full relief for all his sorrows. Look on him as he stands alone, he is "of all men the most miserable;" view him as leaning on his beloved Lord, and there is not a being out of heaven so happy. "Sorrowful yet always rejoicing, having nothing and yet possessing all things," his whole life is a glorious paradox. May the living God give us that fellowship with him, which only can explain it!

We may draw yet one inference more—*the true Christian must be a thankful man.* Be his life what it may, peaceful or troubled, it will be a life of praise.

We have seen that sin is the greatest affliction he knows. In his best moments, he deems it almost his only affliction. Now he finds in the Lord Jesus Christ a Saviour from this overwhelming evil; one who has purchased for him, who secures to him, nay, who has already in part given him, precisely that deliverance for which his soul longs. And what are his feelings as a conviction of this fact enters his mind? They are, they must be, feelings of gratitude and love. If he does not pass through the world to heaven with a never failing song on his lips, he cannot always move along it in silence. "I thank

God,” he says, and says it often, and says it joyfully, “I thank God through Jesus Christ my Lord. He has given me deliverance. Sin lives in me still, but he does not suffer it to reign. I was once its slave. It had tied and bound me in its filthy chains, and I could not break them. I did not wish to break them. It had perverted my affections, as well as enslaved my powers. I was its willing captive. But now, blessed be God! though it torments me by day and vexes me by night; though it often embitters my existence, and makes my soul ache for my dying hour; though at times it leads me captive, and causes me to despise and loathe myself, filling me with unutterable emotions of self-*abhorrence* and disgust; yet it has not dominion over me. Its power is broken. I feel it broken. I look upwards, and, in my Saviour’s strength, I can and I do resist and overcome it. As for its condemning power, it cannot harm me. There is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus. His precious blood is more able to save, than the heaviest guilt to destroy. I know whom I have believed. Sin will still pollute, but he will not suffer it to ruin me. It may keep me wretched for a few short years, but I am safe for ever. At the grave my conflict will be ended. There my enemy must leave me. I shall wake up without a stain or a sorrow, in my Redeemer’s glory and in Jehovah’s likeness. O with what inconceivable joy shall I exclaim in that hour of wonder, I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”