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SERMON VI.

THE HISTORY OF JONAH'S GOURD.

JONAH IV. 6, 7.—“The Lord God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd. But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered.”

WE have little more here than the history of a single plant—its springing up, the effect produced by it on a prophet's mind, and then its withering away;—a subject, it may be thought, scarcely worthy of our attention; but the great God has deemed it worthy of his everlasting pen, and there is not one among us, who may not get from it instruction; more, it may be, than any of us expect.

I. Notice *the springing up of this gourd*. And this took place under very remarkable and truly affecting circumstances. Jonah had preached at Nineveh; he had come to it with a message from God denouncing its speedy ruin. “Yet forty days,” he cried in its streets, “and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” The people profited by the warning; they humbled themselves greatly before the Lord; and the consequence was, the Lord “repented of the evil that he had said that he would do unto them, and he did it not.” And now where is Jonah? Rejoicing in the success of his ministry? going once more through the streets of the rescued city, and exhorting its inhabitants to thankfulness and praise? No; we are told in the first verse of this chapter, that the sparing of Nineveh “displeased him exceedingly.” He thought that it would affect his reputation as a prophet, cause his threatenings in future to be disregarded and himself contemned; and this was more than he could bear. Mortified and angry, he wishes and even prays that he may die; and then leaving the town, seats himself in a booth or tent on the outside of it, still hoping perhaps that in some way or other God would visit it with his judgments, and that he might have the gratification of witnessing them. And this was the man for whom the Lord prepared a gourd, and this the moment when he prepared it.

1. Learn here then that *a gracious God sometimes visits us with mercies when we have reason to expect judgments*; I mean, special mercies when we merit special judgments, and even put ourselves in the way of them.

Rage drives Jonah out of Nineveh into the scorching heat of an eastern sun, and there, while he is quarrelling with God and asking for death, springs up suddenly a wide-spreading plant to shelter and comfort him. Another prophet too, Elijah, is similarly dealt with. He also flies from the

abodes of men; he goes into a desolate wilderness; and in that wilderness, out of the path of duty, comfort from heaven comes to him. God first feeds him by an angel, and then keeps him alive for forty days without any food at all. In seasons like these, the dark seasons of the spiritual life, faith is weak, and a compassionate God stoops to its weakness. He gives the soul sensible indications of his love, recalls it to its duty and happiness by mercies which it can feel and understand.

“But is not this,” you may ask, “an encouragement to sin?” No, brethren; not to sin, but to prayer; an encouragement in every situation to cast ourselves on God and hope in his goodness. It forbids us to say in trying circumstances, “I have brought this evil on myself, and I must bear it.” Out of the lowest depths of trouble and even guilt, it tells us to cry unto the Lord with David, “O bring thou me out of my distresses. Look upon mine affliction and my pain, and forgive all my sins.”

2. And learn further, that *there is no want of his servants too small for God to notice, and no suffering too light for him to relieve.* Jonah’s worthless head is as much an object of his concern, as Jonah’s guilty soul. He provides a Saviour for the one, but that does not content him—he raises up a miraculous gourd for the comfort of the other.

In no point do we mistake more than in this. “This matter,” we say, “is too contemptible to be taken to God.” It grieves us and burdens and perplexes us; but then it is a little thing, and the great God who rolls along the stars in their courses, cannot, we think, deign to look on it; it is beneath his regard. But O the narrowness of our thoughts of God! Is he not an infinite God? and are not his condescension and love boundless? as boundless as the power that fixed the sun in the heavens, and then created the worm on the ground? We limit him, we dishonour him, when we say, “This is too small for him,” as much as when we say, “That is too great.” Then are our views of him right, when we see him everywhere, and go to him in everything; when we expect him to be as mindful of the hairs of our head, as of the brightest orb in the skies. Hear his own account of the matter. The covenant he has made with his chosen, is “ordered,” he tells us, “in all things.” The care he invites us to roll on him, is all our care; the need he promises to supply, is “all our need.” And as for comfort, he bids us look on a mother pressing her infant to her heart, anxious to discover every want, and, in her solicitude, almost labouring to remove imaginary griefs; and then he says to us, “As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you.” Is a plant springing out of the ground to shade our head, wonderful? He is willing to send down his Holy Spirit from the everlasting heavens to drive one painful thought out of our heart.

3. And in all this he magnifies himself; for mark yet another truth implied here—*the Lord often reveals his greatness by the mode in which he imparts comfort and manifests his compassion.*

I allude not to that sudden and strange consolation which he sometimes communicates to the burdened soul in prayer, which comes we hardly know whence nor how, and takes away, almost before we are aware, the anguish which we thought nothing could remove. I speak of those dispensations of providence, those unexpected deliverances, and blessings, and comforts, which every servant of God occasionally experiences; things occurring in a moment to help and gladden him, which all his contrivance and labour could not bring about; and occurring so, that he must be blind not to see in them a divine hand. Jonah goes to work under the wall of Nineveh; he makes him a booth, and sits under its shadow; but the sun still flames above him and strikes down on him: his labour is vain. That was Jonah's work; now comes God and works. In an hour, perhaps in an instant, a plant strikes its root downwards, and sends its branches upwards, and Jonah is sitting at his ease in its cool and refreshing shade. And this without any labour, without a movement, on his part. He neither "laboured for it, nor made it to grow." The Lord, it is said, "made it to come up over him." It covered him as he sat.

We have not to run after goodness and mercy. If we are Christ's friends, they will "follow," run after us. Our compassionate Father will not only do for us what we need, but do it with speed; as the psalmist expresses it, he will do it "right early;" he will set wheels, as it were, to his power and goodness. He will bend events to his purpose; nay, if need be, he will change the course of nature to comfort his saints. "I will deliver thee," he says, "and thou shalt glorify me." "I will so deliver thee, that thou shalt see my glory in thy deliverance, and magnify my name."

II. But we must pass on to a less pleasing part of our subject—*the effect produced on the prophet's mind by this interposition of God in his behalf.*

And now comes out human nature. How unlike the nature of God! We are told that "Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd;" or, as it is rendered in the margin, "he rejoiced in it with great joy."

1. Well may we wonder at the folly of that heart which could take so much pleasure in so mean a thing; but there is greater reason still to wonder at *its amazing selfishness.*

This history is like a libel on human nature. There sits a man, and a man of God too, looking down on a city containing well nigh a million of souls, and expecting the judgments of heaven every moment to blast it; and yet, in this situation, he is studying his own comfort as though he had nothing else to think of, and rejoicing in a little ease for his worthless body, as though he

had acquired some heavenly and everlasting good. "So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd; he rejoiced with great joy." What could he have done more, if the heavens had been rent, and descending angels had told him of a Saviour's advent? A thing like this seems incredible; but look into the world, look into your own hearts, and you believe it in a moment. What at times has been a perishing world, a suffering neighbour, or even a dying friend, to us? Nothing. Our own cares and concerns have absorbed us, have exhausted on themselves every feeling and thought. And when has this occurred? When we have forgotten God; when we have wandered from the Lord; when our love to a bleeding Saviour has grown cold, and our view of him distant, and our communion with him slight. There is no keeping the heart generous and warm, but near the cross. Feeling there may be elsewhere, and sometimes lively and deep feeling, but it will generally be fluctuating and always selfish; it can never be trusted. Nothing beats down the vile love of self, but the love of Christ. That, and that only, can give birth to a pure, and disinterested, and abiding affection; a love that can lay passion, and vanity, and pride, and jealousy, and every other bad feeling of man's bad heart, prostrate beneath its power, and find its delight and its reward in the welfare of its object.

2. But there is something more to be noticed in this strange joy. We see depicted in it *the ingratitude of the human heart*.

Suppose yourselves, brethren, in this prophet's situation; sitting, faint and gasping, on the parched ground under a burning sun, not a tree or a covert near, all desolation without and suffering within. On a sudden branches bend over your head, wide-spreading leaves throw their shade and probably their fragrance around you; you are embowered by a miracle. What would be your first feeling? Wonder perhaps, astonishment. But what your second? You would spring from the earth, or rather you would lie down on it, and pour out the feelings of thankfulness in tears and praise. Such, it may be, has been your conduct under some of your mercies, and blessed then have those mercies proved to you; but if your hearts are like other hearts, like Jonah's heart, it has not been always thus. You have sometimes forgotten God in the comforts he has given you; and those very comforts have been the causes of your forgetting him. They have separated between Christ and your soul; they have taken his place within you, and absorbed in themselves the love, and delight, and thoughts, which are his due, and which but for them he might have possessed. You have prized the gift, and in the gift and because of it, you have lost sight of the bountiful Giver. There is nothing wrong in receiving a mercy with joy; the sin and the shame lie in an effort to take up our rest in it, in saying or feeling, "I have now the desire of my heart, and am satisfied. I have much goods laid

up. Soul, take thine ease.” And this is the way in which we forfeit our comforts.

III. Look at *the withering of this over-valued gourd*. “God,” says the history, “prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered.”

1. Here we are reminded, that *all earthly comforts are short-lived*; they are frail and perishing. They are all gourds, withering gourds. They often die while we are rejoicing in them.

Every one says this, and every one appears to believe it; but it is marvellous how little hold this truth has on the judgment of any one of us, and how much less still it affects our prospects, our purposes, or our conduct. Men talk every hour as though it were a jest. “This sickly child may die,” says one, “but that strong youth will live to be the prop and comfort of my age.” “My parent I must soon lay in the grave,” says another, “but my husband, my brother, my friend, will still be by my side, and prove my solace and stay.” “My property is wasting,” says a third, “but my health is sound. I can labour for more.” “Men are changeable and treacherous, I know,” says yet another, “but I have tried that friend, and he never will fail me.” Such is the language of an inconsiderate world; but what is the language of truth and fact? They take us to the booth of Jonah; they show us his withered gourd; and as they point to it, they say, “It came up in a night, and it perished in a night. Thy gourds also are frail. They may grow in luxuriance and be green in beauty, may afford exceeding pleasure to you while they last; but as to their continuance, think not of it. Hast thou them today? Be thankful and sober-minded in the use of them; but boast not thyself of tomorrow: thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.”

2. And connect with this truth another—*the comfort that most delights us, is generally the first to perish*; the mercies we lose the soonest, are those we love the best.

This is not the mere language of sentiment or poetry; it is the testimony of fact. Jonah’s experience proves its truth, and so does our own. When have we ever put the creature in God’s place, given it that room in our soul which he ought to occupy, but God has either removed it, or embittered it, or put an end to it? Many of our blessings have we lost by loving them too well. We have slain them by setting too great a value on them, and taking our rest in them. There is not a single earthly good that will bear man’s hand, when man firmly grasps it. His touch withers and destroys everything. And O what a mercy for man that it is so! It is in this way that a forgotten God recalls our wandering affections to himself. He lays waste the enthroned creature, that he may once again enthrone himself. He breaks the cistern, not that we may be left parched and fainting in the wilderness of

life, but go and satisfy our thirsting souls once again from the everlasting spring. He crushes the reed, but he substitutes for it a rock. He puts far away from us “lover and friend,” with all the unutterable sweetness of their affection and tenderness, but what does he substitute? Himself; the intense, unfathomable love of his own infinite mind, the presence of Christ, and communion with heaven.

3. But there is something worthy of notice in the time when this gourd withered. It was, you observe, “when the morning rose,” a little before the sun appeared. All through the night, when its protection was but little wanted, it flourished; but now, just at the time when it is most needed, it dies. And what does this show? It shows that *our comforts are often taken from us, when they appear to be the most needed*. Our prop gives way when we are the weakest. Our friends die or fail us, our health sinks, our property goes, just at the very period when we seem as though we could not do without them. We build a house, we get into it, and though it stands on the sand, it does well enough for a time, for there is nothing to try either it or us; but the storm gathers, “the vehement east wind” comes; and where is our refuge now? Prostrate, and we are half-buried in its ruins. O the pains that God takes to empty us of earthly confidence! not only smiting the comforts we most prize, but smiting them in that very hour which is most likely to show us their vanity, and in that very manner also!

4. For observe, lastly, that *our comforts often perish from unforeseen and very inconsiderable causes*. A trifle destroys them.

The instrument that God used wherewith to afflict Jonah, was a contemptible one. He might have sent a hurricane to uproot his gourd, a wild beast out of the forest to devour it, or lightning from heaven to blast it; but he prepares a worm, and but one worm, to execute the work, and the work is done, done effectually, done suddenly, as if with violence; “it smote the gourd that it withered.” The stoutest arm and the keenest axe could not have done more.

Just as God honours himself in blessing by choosing those instruments which appear to the eye of sense altogether inadequate for his purpose, so he often honours himself in afflicting. He strips us bare we know not how; robs us of our dearest mercies by means that we should never have suspected of being able to touch a hair of our heads.

Out of heaven, happiness is never safe. The fruit of a tree ruined it in paradise, and minute indeed are the trifles that often ruin it now. Whose mind has not a word or a look fevered? Who has not had his rest broken, his soul thrown into a tumult, by causes which he would be unwilling for even a child to know; things that he despises himself for heeding, but the tormenting influence of which he cannot withstand? Would you see man in his weakness, brethren? Look at the contemptible trifles that amuse, and

delight, and almost content him: look at much of his gladness—it comes from a gourd. And then look at the trifles that vex and disturb him, that destroy his comforts—a worm can smite them, a breath can end them; yea, he himself, as well as all on earth that grieves and gladdens him, is “crushed before the moth.” Jonah “exceeding glad of his gourd,” was a weaker man than Jonah struggling in the waves. His feebleness comes out, not in the hurricane and storm, but beneath an insect’s blow, the smiting of a worm.

Such is the history of this miraculous plant—it sprang up, it gave delight, it brought into sight the baseness of the human heart, and then it withered. And is not this the history of every comfort the earth yields? Has it not been the history of almost all your own? You need not be told again why it is so; why the same God that prepares the gourd, prepares also the worm; why he takes away the comforts that he gives. There is not a man of God among you, who is not ready to say, “He does it all in love; in compassion for my ignorant, earthly soul; to make me feel in how empty a world I am living, what a corrupt heart I am carrying about in it, what an abundant cause I have to lie down in self-abasement and shame. He does it to allure me to himself; to show me his goodness, and power, and all-sufficiency; to make me see the fulness that is in him, that I may desire it, and draw out of it, and live on it, and rejoice in it. He would make me long for heaven, and till I arrive in heaven, he would reconcile me to his ways. I often quarrel with his dispensations; they thwart my will, or they disappoint my expectations, or they wound my pride. He sends me trouble, and in my trouble I am taught his righteousness, love, and truth. “Thou hast had pity on the gourd,” he said to Jonah, “for the which thou hast not laboured neither madest it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night; and should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also much cattle?” In his providence, he often says the same to me. As I contemplate the ruin he has spread around me, or muse over the fond objects of my idolatry he has hidden from my sight, O how my soul has sometimes felt ashamed of its baseness and wondered at its folly! And then my afflicting God has discovered to me his glory. I see and adore his wisdom. My suspicions of his goodness are changed into confidence and praise.”

This history, in fact, speaks to us all. It bids us care less about a passing world. It tells us plainly that we are liable to be deprived of everything under which we take shelter or delight; and it calls on us to seek after that refuge and comfort, of which no creature either small or great can rob us. And is there such a refuge, such comfort, for harassed, miserable man? Yes, brethren; for every one who is weary of a deceitful earth, and a still more

deceitful heart. It is in Christ Jesus, in a manifested, incarnate God; in his cross, and righteousness, and Spirit; in union and intercourse with him. And it is nowhere else. A crucified Jesus is the one only remedy for all human ills, the one only source of all solid happiness. And a lasting, unchangeable source; “the same yesterday, today, and for ever.” No worm withers this tree of life; no hurricane shakes, no time decays, no enemy harms it. It stands fair and glorious in a desolate world, “a refuge from the storm, a shadow from the heat.” On its head is glory; around it, fragrance; in its leaves, healing; underneath it, rest and safety, gladness and everlasting songs.