

# SERMONS,

PREACHED IN

THE PARISH CHURCH OF GLASBURY,

BRECKNOCKSHIRE,

AND

ST. JAMES'S CHAPEL, CLAPHAM,

SURREY.

BY

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*The Seventh Edition.*

# SERMON XI.

## THE PLAGUE IN THE WILDERNESS.

NUMBERS XVI. 48.—“He stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stayed.”

THE dead here referred to consisted of a fearful multitude. “They that died,” the next verse tells us, “were fourteen thousand and seven hundred.” And they appear to have all died instantaneously and in a mass. The plague came upon them as they were gathered together in one immense assembly around the tabernacle in the wilderness, not attacking them one by one and sending them home to sicken and die in their tents, but sweeping them down where they stood. And why this rapid and tremendous judgment? To answer this question, let us look in the first place, at the origin of this plague; and then, that we may have another instance of the divine mercy fixed in our memories, let us pass on to the cessation of it.

I. To say that this evil had *its origin* in sin, would be to say nothing. All evil proceeds from sin: there is not a pang or sorrow in the universe, which has not this as its source. But then suffering owes its existence to sin in various ways. Sometimes it is sent in mercy to prevent sin; thus Paul had a thorn in the flesh “lest he should be exalted.” At other times, it comes to discover sin and subdue it in the Christian’s heart. “Before I was afflicted,” says David, “I went astray, but now have I kept thy word.” More frequently however its design is to answer the purposes of God’s moral government; to punish sin; to manifest the abhorrence in which the great Ruler of the universe holds it, and thus to deter his creatures from the commission of it. And such was its object here. The Israelites had sinned against the Lord; this plague was the punishment of their sin.

And now perhaps we are ready to set these men before us as guilty of some enormous crime; but look to the history. The only offence we find recorded against them was this—they had murmured, and that not against God, but against Moses and Aaron, men like themselves. But how different often is sin from what sin appears! It seems a very trifle, an affront offered to a fellow-worm; but it strikes at the Holy One of Israel. Strip it of its disguise, it comes out disobedience, rebellion, against the King of kings.

1. This offence involved in it *an overlooking of God's providence*; at all events, a refusing to acknowledge it.

“Ye have killed the people of the Lord,” said the Israelites to Moses and Aaron. Nothing could be more untrue. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, had excited a rebellion in the camp. Contrary to the divine appointment, one of them had aspired to the priesthood in the church, the others, to supreme sway in the state. God would not bear this contempt of his authority. He

wrought immediately two miracles to show his indignation. The earth first opened her mouth, and swallowed up Dathan and Abiram with their families; and then “there came out a fire from the Lord, and consumed the two hundred and fifty men that offered incense” with Korah.

Now some in our day would have resolved these tremendous judgments into accidents, distressing casualties. They would have talked to us of natural causes; and though no causes at all adequate to effects so fearful could be found, yet something in nature would have been discovered or imagined and then magnified, till God and his agency, miracle and judgment, had all disappeared. The Israelites acted not thus; but they acted in a like spirit. “This desolation,” they said, “is the work of Moses and Aaron. It comes out of tyranny and priestcraft.” They charged their rulers with destroying the people. And hence God laid bare his arm. To vindicate his own providence, to force the nation to see that he had been the author of the judgments they had witnessed, he strikes a blow which no mortal arm could have inflicted; so rapid, so destructive, so awful, that unbelief itself must have been compelled to ascribe it to his omnipotent hand. As it were in a moment, fourteen thousand of the people shiver and drop in the wilderness.

We must take heed how we push God out of his own world. He really is its Governor. He is as much the source of the natural evils that lay it waste, as of the mercies that gladden it. And he is determined to be seen and acknowledged as such. “I am the Lord,” he says, “and there is none else.” “I form the light and create darkness. I make peace and create evil. I the Lord do all these things.” “The Lord is known,” says the psalmist—his existence, his authority, his providence, are all known—“by the judgment which he executeth.” We may go farther yet. He claims for himself as its author even the woe that is appalling an eternal world. He will be recognized as the builder of hell itself. “Tophet is ordained of old,” says the prophet; “he hath made it deep and large; the pile thereof is fire and much wood;” and then he adds, “the breath of the Lord, like a stream of brimstone, doth kindle it.” The wrath that burns in eternity, is called “the wrath of the Lamb.” It is described as coming from that very Saviour who is enthroned in the heavens in a form of mercy, and is the light, and life, and glory, of that world of joy. These are awful declarations, but they are as true as they are awful. Happy for us if we are willing to acknowledge their truth. We must come to this acknowledgment in the end. God will not allow us to say for ever, “Accident brought this evil on me, chance this disease, a casualty this bereavement, the injustice or treachery of my fellow-man this loss and poverty.” Either by his Spirit, or by his providence, or by both, God will drive this atheism out of us. He will force us to say, “It is the Lord. He is in this place, and I knew it not. Verily there is a God that judgeth in the earth.”

2. The murmuring of these sinners included in it also *a daring censure of God's ways*.

Whatever God does bears the impress of God. In some way or other, it manifests his perfections, and consequently is calculated to bring honour to his name. Now a mind in a right state praises him for every work of his hands; and it does so on account of the traces of his glory it either discovers in that work, or, though hidden, believes to be there. Indeed this is God's great design in all his doings, to draw forth praise from his creatures by revealing to them his excellencies, and thus to surround himself with a delighted and adoring universe. It follows then that to censure any of God's ways, is, as far as in us lies, to frustrate the object at which God aims in these ways; to rob him of his honour, and worse than this—to asperse his character and vindicate his enemies. And of this offence these Israelites were guilty. They do not indeed expressly say that Korah and his companions were unjustly destroyed, but they plainly intimate that such was the fact. They stand up for them; they honour them by calling them “the people of the Lord;” they manifest a secret approbation of their offence, and an open regret at their doom. When the Egyptians were overwhelmed, they made the shores of the Red Sea re-echo with their song of praise. Then the Lord, they said, “had triumphed gloriously;” he was “glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders.” They appear to have set no bounds to their exulting adoration. But these Egyptians were their enemies. Now their companions and relatives have perished beneath Jehovah's arm, and no matter how guilty the men were, how closely resembling in their impiety and presumption Pharaoh and his host, their overthrow is regarded as an injury done to the nation; it is injustice, cruelty, murder: “the people murmured.”

All this was natural, but it was not right. Let nature say what it will, let the feelings of an anguished heart prompt what they may, “the Lord is righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works;” as righteous, and holy, and perhaps as gracious too, in those very judgments which desolate our families and wring our souls, as in the mercies which come to us the most undisguised and yield us the greatest joy. We must strive to glorify him for both. Christian charity indeed “rejoiceth not in iniquity;” she takes no pleasure in witnessing pain and misery; like her divine Lord, she weeps over a dying world, and she mourns over a burning hell; yet consistently with herself, she may exult in the suppression of triumphant wickedness; she may, she does, she must, adore her God for putting down his foes. They are mischievous in his creation; they are scattering around the seeds of misery and death; and mercy to a suffering world requires him to crush their power. Many of us dislike to hear the term “justice” applied to God, for we attach to it the idea of something vindictive in the divine mind; but in such

a world as ours, or in any world, a benevolent ruler must be a just ruler, he must make distinctions between the evil and the good, he dares not “bear the sword in vain.” Place a God of love on a throne, and he becomes, he must become, a God of justice; his love compels him to arm his right hand with vengeance, and to make the workers of iniquity feel its stroke. A governor who should treat alike vice and virtue, could not reign long over one petty kingdom of the earth, could not rule a single parish of our own kingdom, no, nor a single house; how much less this huge world, a mighty universe, a crowded earth and an almost boundless heaven!

Look up to Jehovah's own peaceful dwelling place. It is a region of the purest, the most intense and unfailing love; the birth-place of love, its home; but mark how the just judgments of the Lord are regarded there. In the Revelation of St. John, the fall of Babylon is predicted. It is to be sudden, complete, final. And what is to follow? On earth, lamentation and mourning over her fate. The kings of the earth are described as “bewailing” her; the merchants of the earth “weep” over her; the people who had come in ships to her borders, “cry and cast dust on their heads “when they see her smoke. Nothing is heard on every side but, “Alas, alas, that great city Babylon! that mighty city!” The whole world appears ready to break out into open indignation and murmuring at the severity of her doom. And now go up into heaven. There not a tear is shed over her desolation, not a complaint uttered. One moment, as she sinks into ruin, there seems to be a silence of awe and wonder; the next, a burst of praise. “A great voice of much people is heard in heaven, saying, Alleluia! Salvation, and glory, and honour, unto the Lord our God; for true and righteous are his judgments.” And again they said, “Alleluia!” And a third time the cry is raised, “Alleluia!” And even then the adoration of heaven has not reached its height. “A voice,” says the wondering John, “came out of the throne, saying, Praise our God, all ye his servants, and ye that fear him, both small and great;” and then comes the mighty chorus of heaven’s song; “I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia! for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.” And what ought to be our answer? “So let all thine enemies perish, O God; but let them that love thee, be as the sun when he goeth forth in his might.”

3. There was yet a third evil comprehended in the murmuring of these Israelites; and this was *a contempt of God's warnings*.

The judgments they had lately seen inflicted on their countrymen, were of a very awful character. Even in that age of wonders, a gaping earth and descending flames were no ordinary occurrences. Their object was evident. It was to remove evil out of the camp, and to warn the whole nation against discontent and rebellion. Eleazar, the son of Aaron, is accordingly told to

take up the censers in which some of the offenders had dared to burn incense, and to make of them “broad plates for a covering of the altar.” In this situation, they were to be “a sign,” a conspicuous and fearful memorial, “to the children of Israel” of the divine indignation. And what regard did they pay to this sign and to the terrible judgments it represented? Did they tremble, and weep, and set aside days and weeks to humble themselves and pray? “On the morrow,” the very next day, “all the congregation of the children of Israel murmured.” The earth had scarcely closed over some of their companions, the embers of the fire that had consumed others were hardly extinguished, the memorial of their crime and its punishment had been fastened but a few hours on the altar, when the whole camp was again in a revolt. Judgments, and warnings, and portents, and prodigies, were nothing to them. They gathered themselves together, just as they had done on the former occasion, and braved all the vengeance of heaven.

And this is human nature, brethren. This is the nature that every one of us inherits, that you and I perhaps still possess unaltered and unsubdued; the very nature which thousands around us extol as rational, and upright, and noble. O that we may never pass a single day of our lives without fervently praying that in our case it may be renewed and changed! O that we may long for nothing so much as to have done with this nature, to be in a world where its madness works no more! Here it can withstand any thing. It can harden itself against any mercy, despise any threatening, make light of, nay, forget, and forget in an hour, any judgment. It can trifle amidst the most appalling terrors of Jehovah’s providence. It can sport on the borders of the grave, and take its ease on the very brink of destruction.

A careless observer of his fellow-creatures finds it hard to credit the history of the Jewish nation in the wilderness. He deems it an extravagant, overcharged portrait. Or if he regards it as, in the main, a faithful narrative, he looks on the people it describes as standing alone, removed as far from all other men in folly and crime, as in mercies and privileges. But the man who has learned any thing of his own heart, entertains no such notion. He reads in his own history, he sees in his own breast, a counterpart to Israel’s madness and Israel’s guilt. He feels that he has done a thousand times over the same things that this sinful nation did, and under circumstances which appear to him as aggravated. Have you never overlooked the divine providence, brethren; ascribing to misfortune and accident the work of God? Have you never reasoned or talked as though the Lord of the heavens had abandoned his throne, and turned loose his wide dominions to the reign of chance? Have you also never sat in judgment on God’s ways, and wondered at their severity? never censured his doings as unmerciful, if not unjust? Which of us has not despised his warnings, trembling one day at his judgments, and making light of them the next? in the hour of sickness and

affliction, resolving that the world shall no longer engross our affections and waste our strength; and then in the day of health and quiet, nay, before that day, while yet smarting under the consequences of disease or calamity, breaking these resolutions, forgetting all we have seen and felt and promised, and becoming again as much like our former selves, as much like the rest of mankind, as much like Israel of old, as though we had never seen Jehovah's outstretched arm, as though sickness, and death, and sorrow, had never entered our houses or come near our world?

And is all this to go on for ever? No; God will not bear with it. "There is wrath gone out from the Lord" against us, "the plague is begun." A sentence of death has been passed upon every soul of man. Millions of our race have already perished; the destroying angel is hastening to cut down millions more. The world some of us deem so fair and happy, is nothing better than the camp of Israel—a scene of mercy, it is true, but yet a scene of misery, terror, and death. How anxious then should we be to look around for a deliverer! Blessed be God, there is one near. This history speaks of him.

## II. Consider now *the cessation of the pestilence*.

1. The first remark we make concerning this, relates to its Author. *It was effected by one who might have been supposed least likely to interfere for such a purpose.*

The rebellion of this perverse people was directed against Moses and Aaron. They were the objects of their murmurs, and appeared in danger of being sacrificed as victims to their fury. But one of these became the instrument of their safety. No sooner did Aaron see the peril they were in, than "he ran into the midst of the congregation" "to turn away the divine indignation. "He stood," we read, "between the dead and the living, and the plague was stayed."

And can we fail to discover here the great High Priest of God's guilty church, the despised and rejected Jesus? Aaron was a type of him. The scriptures often speak of him in this character, and in this character he undoubtedly acted, whether he knew it or not, at this time. Now just as these trembling Jews found in him an intercessor and deliverer, so may we, in the midst of our rebellion and sufferings, find in Christ Jesus a Saviour. Like them, we have provoked the Most High to anger; we have forced a God of mercy to become a God of vengeance; but as in this case, so in ours, deliverance comes from the very source whence we might well have looked for destruction. God himself has provided for us a Saviour. Nay, he himself has become our Saviour. It was none other than the everlasting Jehovah, who appeared in our world as "the man Christ Jesus," and, "while we were yet enemies," wrought out for us an "eternal redemption." The offers of mercy too, that are still sent to us day by day, come from the very Being whom of all beings we have most wronged, the order and beauty of whose creation

we have marred, whose glory we have tarnished, whose providence we have sometimes denied and sometimes censured, whose warnings we have a thousand times mocked and are mocking still. We admire the forbearance of Moses as he falls down on the earth and prays for his reviling countrymen, we wonder at the forgiving spirit of Aaron as he hastens to save them; but think of Golgotha and Calvary. O what forbearance was that which restrained an omnipotent arm amidst contumely and insults, such as even the abject creatures that offered them, had scarcely merited; which cried, under the most cruel wrongs the earth ever inflicted, in the bitterest agony the earth ever bore, "Father, forgive them!" And think of the right hand of Jehovah. We are offending every moment the exalted Redeemer who sits there, but his work of mercy still goes on. It is as true of him now as in the first moment he ascended his throne, that "he ever liveth to make intercession for us." We have still the same Advocate with the Father as he in whom the beloved John confided; the same High Priest in the heavens as he in whom Paul of old gloried—"Christ the righteous;" "Jesus, the Son of God."

*2. The cessation of this plague was attended with a display of the most self-denying and ardent love.*

There is a love that professes much and will perhaps bear something for its object, but will do very little. It does not bestir itself; there is nothing of what the Bible calls "the labour of love" about it. It is a sentiment, rather than a principle. But the love of Aaron for Israel was not of this kind. "Go quickly unto the congregation," said Moses to him; and how did he act? He might have pleaded the apparent uselessness of such a measure, its inconsistency with the dignity of his character, or its positive danger. Nothing however of this kind moved him, or, as far as we can see, even occurred to him. Losing sight of every selfish consideration, he rushed at once amidst the perishing throng. He took his station amidst pestilence and death. "He stood between the dead and the living," absorbed in one object; a determined, reckless friend of these guilty men.

What an example for ministers of the gospel! What a reproof of our coldness of heart, and love of ease, and despicable self-indulgence! Pray for us, brethren, that we may resemble this Aaron; that we may catch something of the self-denial and ardour of this devoted priest. But we must again look higher; we must again look through Aaron to Aaron's Lord.

There is a pestilence raging in our world, a deadly pestilence, the most tremendous evil the creation knows, fatal alike to the body and the soul. None in the world has escaped it; none can remove it. Heaven has accordingly come to our relief. A stupendous scheme of deliverance for us has been formed there; and whence did it originate? In precisely the same feeling that placed the Jewish high priest between the dead and the living—in



compassion, in love, in pure benevolence. There was nothing in man, that merited it; nothing in the nature of things, that led one step towards it; nothing in the circumstances in which God was placed, that demanded it. It sprang, in all its amazing glory, out of the depths of the divine love, startling the universe with its unlooked for and unparalleled grace.

And how did he who was destined to carry this scheme into effect, execute his strange commission? It involved on his part not condescension only, not danger merely, but degradation and suffering such as never before had been thought of, and a death so beset with terrors, that the guiltiest sinner that had ever died, never knew their fearfulness. Yet look into the records of his life. We see there no backwardness to enter on his work, no timidity or shrinking in carrying it on. "Lo, I come," he says, "to do thy will, O God;" and then he descends from the realms of glory to this abode of vileness, from a happy heaven to a wretched earth, with greater readiness than ever monarch stepped up to his throne. And when here, he utters no complaint, he breathes no sigh for his own pure and glorious kingdom. "My meat," he says, and says it in a sinner's form in a sinner's world, "my refreshment and my joy, is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work." He speaks of himself as "straitened till it should be accomplished." And when the hour of his final agony approached, O what a triumph of constancy and love was there! We cannot understand it. We see enough in him at Gethsemane to discover that the travail of his soul could have exhausted an angel's strength and patience; we see enough of him on the cross to assure us that nothing could overcome his. His love sustained him. It was the spring of all his labours and all his sufferings. These, in their extent and importance, go far beyond our comprehension, and we can say no more of the feeling that prompted them, than that it is, like himself, unfathomable; as much above the love of mortals, as the highest heavens are above the earth.

3. We may make yet another remark—*the cessation of this plague was brought about by means that seemed altogether inadequate, that appeared, in fact, to have no connection at all with the end proposed.*

The evil to be stopped was a pestilence, a most rapid and fatal disease. A thoughtful bystander, taking into his consideration all the circumstances of the case, would probably have said, "Human means of aid are all hopeless here. This is evidently an infliction from heaven, and nothing but the power of heaven can remove it. All that man can do, is to cry for mercy." In this view of the matter, the two Jewish rulers appear to have participated. When the Lord told them of the coming judgment, "they fell," we are told, "upon their faces," their frequent attitude of supplication. But, observe, neither their humiliation nor the fervour of their prayers altered the divine purpose. While they were actually on the ground, the plague began, spreading

around them terror and desolation. And now notice their conduct. "Take a censer," says Moses to Aaron, "and put fire therein from off the altar," the altar of burnt-offering, thus connecting the measure about to be adopted with a sacrifice, "and put on incense, and go quickly unto the congregation, and make an atonement for them." "And Aaron," we read, "took as Moses commanded, and ran into the midst of the congregation, and, behold, the plague was begun among the people; and he put on incense and made an atonement." Now it is natural to ask, what connection could there possibly be between a raging pestilence and this burning censer? How could the one be affected by the other? A thoughtful bystander again might have deemed Aaron, as he ran forward with his incense, either woefully superstitious or bereft in his panic of his reason. The people might have been expected to deride or curse him for this mockery of relief. But he stood, with this seemingly powerless censer, "between the dead and the living, and the plague was stayed." The moment he reached the spot, the arm of vengeance was arrested. On the one side of him was a spectacle of ghastly horror, none of the people remained alive; on the other side, a scene of deliverance, and safety, and wonder, and praise. And all this effected, not without prayer, but yet not by prayer—in this strange manner, by perfume sprinkled on fire taken from an altar.

Bring this matter home to yourselves, brethren. You are often told of a way in which your sins may be pardoned, your sorrows lightened, and your souls saved. You know well what this way is. He who came so freely and interposed so wonderfully between us and death, gave his own soul an offering for our sin; he made an atonement for it. God makes known to you elsewhere in his word, what this history fails to discover, how you may appropriate to yourselves the benefit of this atonement. He tells you that a simple faith in his testimony concerning this Intercessor, will save your souls; that a simple reliance on the efficacy of his atoning death, hope what you will from it, will never disappoint you; that you may have "redemption," a complete, and lasting, and glorious redemption, "through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins." He tells you too that you can have this redemption in no other way; that humiliation, and tears, and prayers, that all you can do, or suffer, or experience, will never rescue you; will never, without this simple faith in this sacrifice, at all better your condition, but leave you with the curse of a merciful God on you in this world, and the wrath of the Lamb for your inheritance in the next.

Now some of you are staggered at this easy method of salvation. It does not commend itself to your judgment. You try in vain to see the reasonableness of it. There is no connection in it, as far as you can discover, between the cause and the effect. Nay, it appears to you perhaps an absurdity or worse. You do not hesitate therefore to reject, and, it may be, to scorn it.

I will not pause to ask you whether that man can know much of real religion, who despises that in which God declares he glories; whether he can be in the way to heaven, prepared and meet for it, who pours contempt on a scheme of mercy which is evidently the contemplation, the praise, the exultation, of heaven. I would rather say, examine the history of these Jews. Where can you find any great deliverance vouchsafed them, any one signal mercy given them, which did not reach them in some strange manner, which was not brought about by means that you must deem utterly inadequate, which did not spring out of a source whence they could previously have expected no deliverance or mercy whatsoever? The blow of a rod first divides a sea for their deliverance, and then brings water for them from a rock. A glance at an image of brass heals thousands of their deadly wounds. Their food for forty years drops from the clouds. All is opposed to our ordinary observation and experience; all is what you would call unaccountable. And yet you profess to believe the Bible, and the Bible says, this is all fact, all truth. What becomes then of your objection to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ? I mean, to that view of the gospel, which ascribes the salvation and blessedness of an immortal soul entirely to the cross? to faith in its efficacy, a discovery of its glory, and an experience of its power? O that you could but be prevailed on to trust God! to trust the declarations of his faithful word, rather than the reasonings of your own benighted and half withered minds! O that you were willing to allow him the prerogative which he claims, and will exercise, and will vindicate too, of accomplishing his own ends of mercy by his own means, covering himself with glory while he surrounds you with happiness!

Ere long, brethren, there will be but one opinion amongst us on this point. Yet a little while and a scene will be unfolded, which no unbelief can withstand or reasoning gainsay. Amidst a convulsed universe, we shall see him who once hung on a cross at Jerusalem and now offers us the free and glorious salvation he purchased there, not indeed occupying a station between the dead and the living, for we shall all live then as we have never lived yet; he will stand between the two great divisions of the human race, the blessed and the accursed, the lost and the saved. On one side of him will be joy such as neither earth nor heaven has ever yet witnessed; on the other, a spectacle that will make the destruction of Dathan and Abiram appear a trifle; the fire that consumed Korah, scarcely worthy remembrance; the plague that swept away the thousands of Israel, a thing of nought. Where shall we stand in that day? On which side of the great High Priest of the heavens shall we be left, when the earth is no more?