

SERMONS

ON

IMPORTANT SUBJECTS;

BY THE

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LATE OF PEMBROKE COLLEGE, OXFORD, AND CHAPLAIN TO
THE RIGHT HON. THE COUNTESS OF HUNTINGDON.

WITH A MEMOIR OF THE AUTHOR,

BY SAMUEL DREW, A. M.

AND A

DISSERTATION ON HIS CHARACTER, PREACHING, &c.

BY THE REV. JOSEPH SMITH.

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SERMON LXVIII.

THE BURNING BUSH.

And he looked, and behold the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed; and Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.—Exod. iii. 2, 3.

It is a common saying, and common sayings are generally founded on matter of fact, that it is always darkest before break of day; and I am persuaded, that if we do justice to our own experience, as well as consider God's dealings with his people in preceding ages, we shall find that man's extremity has been usually made God's opportunity, and that "when the enemy has broken in like a flood, the Spirit and providence of God has lifted up a standard against him and I believe at the same time, that however we may dream of a continued scene of prosperity in church or state, either in respect to our bodies, souls, or temporal affairs, we shall find this life to be chequered, that the clouds return after the rain, and the most prosperous state attended with such cloudy days, as may make even the people of God sometimes cry, "All men are liars, and God has forgotten to be gracious."

The chapter, in which is our text, is an instance of this. What a glorious day of the Son of man was that when Joseph sent for his father to Egypt; and the good old patriarch, after he had thought his son had been dead many years, agreeably surprised by a message from him to come to him with all his family, and are by him comfortably settled in Goshen; where the good old patriarch, after many a stormy day, died in peace, and was highly honoured at his funeral by Pharaoh and his servants, and attended to the sepulchre of his fathers in Canaan by all his sons. After which, Joseph continued to live in splendour, lord of all the land of Egypt; and his brethren, doubtless, in the height of prosperity: but how sadly did the scene change at Pharaoh's death, soon after which, "another king arose that knew not Joseph," verifying the observation, 'new lords, new laws,' by whom the descendants of Jacob, instead of reigning in Goshen, were made bond-slaves; many, many long years, employed in making bricks, and, in all probability, had what we call their Bibles taken from them, by being forced to conform to the idolatry of Egypt, and so were in a worse state than the unhappy negroes in America are at this day. No doubt, numbers of them either wondered that ever they had been prospered at all, or that God had forgot them now; but what a mercy it is that "a thousand years in God's sight are but as one day," and therefore when God's time is come, the set time that he has appointed, he will, maugre [in spite of] all the opposition of men and devils, he will come down and

deliver his people, and in such a manner, that the enemy shall know, as well as friends, it is the Lord's doing.

A deliverer is born and bred in Pharaoh's court, a Moses is brought up in all the learning of the Egyptians, for Pharaoh intended him for a high and exalted post: but when offers of the highest preferment are made to him, he did not catch at them as some folks now do, who are very good and humble till something occurs to take them from God. Young as he was, he refused the highest dignity, and spurned at it with a holy contempt; and chooses rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than enjoy all the grandeur and pleasures of, perhaps, one of the greatest courts on earth. Forty years continued he in this state of obscurity, in which time he acquired such a competent degree and variety of knowledge, as qualified him for every thing God intended him for: the occasion of this, was his kind attempt to compose a difference between two of his brethren, one of whom accused him of murder, on which, he that was to be king in Jeshurun is forced to fly into a strange land; there he submits to the humble office of a servant, marries, and lives in a state of subjection for forty years, as was said before. At length, when he was eighty years old, dreaming of no such thing, behold God calls, and commands him to go and deliver his people; as he himself informs us, who is the author of this book, ver. 1. "Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, priest of Midian:" he might have said, What, such a scholar as I, keep a parcel of sheep! such a learned man as I am, employed in such a menial service! some proud hearts would break first, but you never knew a truly great man, but would stoop; some that are called great men, swell till they burst; like sturdy oaks, they think they can stand every wind, till some dreadful storm come and blow them up by the roots, while the humble reed bends and rises again. Moses was one of the latter, he keeps the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, and leads them to the mountain of God, even to Horeb. This shows how persons ought to methodize their time; but however the name of a Methodist is despised, they will never be bad servants and masters; you would be only weathercocks, unless you took care to order things in proper seasons: the devotion and business of a Methodist go hand in hand; I will assure you, Moses was a Methodist, a very fine one, a very strong one too; he kept his flock, but that did not hinder his going to Horeb, he took them to the desert, and being thus employed in his lawful business, God met him.

Some say, we encourage people in idleness: I deny it; we say, people ought to be industrious; and I defy any one to say, a person is called by God, that is negligent in his calling. "The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the bush:" some think this angel was Gabriel, but most agree, and I believe with the greatest probability, that it was Jesus Christ,

“the angel of the everlasting covenant;” and an expositor tells you, that the eternal *Logos*, longing to become man, often visited this earth in that form, as an evidence of his coming by and by, and dying a cursed death for man. The manner of this angel’s appearing is taken particular notice of, it was to Moses when nobody was with him. I do not hear he had so much as a boy, or one companion; and I mention this, because I believe we have often found we are never less alone than when with God; we often want this and that companion, but happy they that can say, Lord, thy company is enough. Moses was startled at the sight, and I do not know that he is to be discommended for it, it was not to gratify a bare curiosity, but seeing a bush burning, it engaged his attention, and made him think that something was uncommon; “the bush burned with fire, and yet was not consumed;” this startled him, as it was intended to do; for where God designs to speak, he will first gain attention from the person spoken to; Moses therefore says, “I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burned;” he did not know but the bush might take fire by some accident; he saw no fire come from above, he saw no fire round the bush, yet that did not so much startle him, as to see, though it did burn, it was not consumed, or in the least diminished; it was a strange sight, but it was, my brethren, a glorious one; a sight which, I pray God, you and I may behold with faith and comfort this evening; for, my dear hearers, this bush, and the account of it, was given for our learning; and I will venture to say, could Moses arise from the dead, he would not be angry with me for telling you this is of no private interpretation, but, is intended as a standing lesson, as a significant emblem of the church, and every individual child of God, till time itself shall be no more.—I would therefore observe to you, that this bush,

In the first place, is typical of the church of God in all ages; the bush was burning, why might it not be a tall cedar, why might it not be some large or some glorious tree, why should the great God choose a bush, a little bush of briars and thorns, above any other thing, but because the church of Christ generally consists of poor, mean, despicable creatures! though it be all glorious within, yet it is all despicable without. It is observable, that when the church came to prosper, when Constantine smiled on it, it was soon hugged to death; and that great poet, Milton, observes, that when that emperor gave ministers rich vestments, high honours, great livings, and golden pulpits, there was a voice heard from heaven, saying, this day there is poison come into the church; and I have sometimes said in discourse, I do not doubt but if any one made an experiment, and left £100,000 or £200,000 only among the Methodists, there would be hundreds and thousands that would not be reckoned Methodists now, that would turn Methodists presently, that would buy

a hymn-book, because a part of the legacy would pay for the hymn-book, and would wish to have a living into the bargain: but though “not many mighty men, not many noble, are called,” yet some are. If any of you be rich here, and are Christians, thank God for it, you ought to be doubly thankful for it. God’s people are but like a little bramble bush. I remember an eminent minister said once, when I heard him preach upon Christmas-day, “Christ personal is very rich, but Christ mystical is very poor;” and Jesus Christ does this on purpose to confound the world. When he comes to judgment, millions that have their thousands now, will be damned and burnt to all eternity, and Christ’s church will be rich to all eternity, that is now like a bramble all on fire.

“The bush burned,” what is that for? It showed that Christ’s church while in this world, will be a bush burning with fiery trials and afflictions of various kinds; this was a lively emblem of the state of religion, and liberty of Israel, at that time: they were busy making of brick, and there consequently were burning continually; as though the Lord had said, this bush is burning with fire, so my people are burning with slavery. Ah, but, say you, that was only the case of the Israelites when they were under Pharaoh; pray is not that the case of the church in all ages? Yes, it has been; read your Bibles, and you may instantly see it is little else than an historical account of a burning bush; and though there might be some periods wherein the church had rest, yet these periods have been of a short date; and if God’s people have “walked in the comforts of the Holy Ghost,” it is only like a calm that precedes an earthquake. If you remember, before the last earthquake it was a fine morning, and who, when they arose in the morning, would have thought the earth should shake under them before night: and so with the church, when they are in a calm, and all seems safe there, then comes a storm: God prepare us for it.

But this is not only the case with the church of Christ collected, but also it is so with individual believers, especially those that God intends to make great use of as prophets in his church. I know very well that it is said, that now the case is altered: modern commentators therefore, and our great Dr. Young calls them downy doctors. They tell us, now we have got a Christian king and governor, and are under the toleration act, we shall have no persecution; and, blessed be God, we have had none since this family has been on the throne: may God continue it till time shall be no more! Yet, my dear hearers, we shall find, if God’s word is true, whether we are born under a despotic power or a free government, that they that will live godly in Christ Jesus must suffer persecution. You have heard of that saying, “Wonder not at the fiery trial wherewith you are to be tried: (and God saith,) I have chosen

thee (which is applicable to every believer) in the furnace of affliction.” Now, the furnace is a hot place, and they that are tried in the furnace must be burnt surely. Now, what must the Christian burn with? With tribulation and persecution. I heard a person not long ago say, I have no enemies. Bishop Latimer came to a house one day, and the man of the house said, he had not met with a cross in all his life; give me my horse, says the good bishop, I am sure God is not here, where no cross is. But suppose we are not persecuted by the world, is there one Christian but is persecuted by his friends. If there is an Isaac in the family, I warrant there is an Ishmael to mock at him, “Woe is me, (says David,) that I must dwell with Meshech, and in Kedar:” and in one’s own family, one’s own brothers and sisters, one’s own dependants, though they wait for our death, and perhaps, long to have us gone, that they may run away with our substance, to have these persons mock at us, and, if they dare not speak out, yet let us see they hate the God we worship; if this is thy case, why, God knows, poor soul, thou art a burning bush: but if we have no such thing as mocking, yet if we are surrounded with afflictions, domestic trials, the loss of dear and near friends, the bad conduct of our children, the dreadful misconduct of those that are dependent upon us? O there is many a parent here that is a burning bush; burning with what? With family afflictions; some do not care what becomes of their children; O, I thank God, I have left my boy so much, and my daughter a coach, perhaps; ah! well your son and daughter may ride in that coach post to the devil: but the godly man says, I want an eternal inheritance for my son; I want God’s blessing for him; this is the poor man’s prayer, while the poor deluded youth mocks him. Or, supposing this is not the case, a person may burn with inward temptation; you have heard of the fiery darts of the devil, and were you to feel them, I believe you would find them fiery darts indeed! and you have great reason to suspect your experience, your having any interest in the love of the Son of God at all, if you never found the fiery darts of the devil. O, says one, I never felt the devil. I am sure thou mayest feel him now; thou art dadda’s own child; thou art speaking the very language of the devil, and he is teaching thee to deny thy own father; therefore, graceless child of the devil, you never felt the devil’s fiery darts, it is because the devil is sure of thee: he has got thee into a damnable slumber. May the God of love wake thee before real damnation comes! The fiery darts of Satan are poisoned, and wherever they stick, they fill the person with tormenting pain like fire. This I mention, because there are some poor souls perhaps here tonight, whom the devil tells thou hast committed the unpardonable sin; you are afraid to come to sacrament, you are afraid to go to prayer, because at these seasons the devil disturbs thee most, and tempts you to leave these seasons; and there are some

go on thus burning a great while. My brethren, the time would fail, and I shall draw this discourse to too great a length, and hinder you from your families, if I were to mention but a few more of those thousands that the believer burns with—the trials without, and, what is still worse, their trials within. Why, says one, it is very strange you talk thus tonight. I am sorry it is strange to any of you; sure you are not much acquainted with your Bibles, and less with your hearts, if you know not this. Why sure, say some, you make God a tyrant: no, but having made ourselves devils incarnate, we are now in a state of preparation, and these various trials are intended by the great God to train us up for heaven; and therefore, that you may not think I am drawing a picture without any life, give me leave to observe, that it is particularly remarkable, that though “the bush burned, it was not consumed;” it was this struck Moses, he looked to see why the bush was not consumed.

But the burning I have been here painting forth to you, is not a consuming, but a purifying fire; is not that enough to answer the shade that has been already drawn? it is true the bush burns, the Christian is persecuted, the Christian is oppressed, the Christian is burned with inward trials, he is perplexed at times, he is “cast down, but (blessed be God) he is not destroyed,” he is not in despair. Who is that, that says he has got into such an estate that nothing disturbs him? vain man! he discovers an ignorance of Christ: are you greater then than the apostle Paul? Some people think that the apostles had no trials; so they think, perhaps, of some ministers, that they are always on the mount, while, perhaps, they have been in the burning to get that sermon for them. We that are to speak for others, must expect to be tempted in all things like to our brethren, or we should be only poor whip-syllabub preachers, and not reach men’s hearts. But whether ministers or people burn, the great God, the angel of the everlasting covenant, spake to Moses out of the bush. He did not stand at a distance from the bush, he did not speak to him so much as one yard or foot from the bush, but he spake to him out of the bush. He said, Moses, Moses, my people shall burn in this bush to the end of time, but be not afraid, I will succour them. When they burn, I will burn too. There is a scripture vastly strong to this purpose, in which it is not said, “the good will of him that was in the bush,” but “the good will of him that dwelt in the bush.” Amazing! I thought God dwelt in heaven; but as a poor woman who was once in darkness fourteen years, before she was brought out of it, said, God has two homes, one in heaven, the other in the lowest heart. He dwells in the bush, and I am sure if he did not, the devil and their own cursed hearts would burn the bush to ashes. How is it that it is not consumed? Why, it is because God has declared it shall not be consumed; he has made an everlasting covenant, and I pity those that are not acquainted with an interest in

God's covenant; and it would be better that people would pity them, than dispute with them. I really believe a disputing devil is one of the worst devils that can be brought into God's church, for he comes with his gown and book in his hand, and I should always suspect the devil when he comes in his gown and band, and this is the cause they agree and disagree. Some, who it is to be hoped are God's children, if you tell them that God has loved them with an everlasting love, they are afraid to suck it in, and especially if you pop out the word election, or that hard word predestination, they will be quite frightened; but talk to them in another way, their dear hearts will rejoice. God has said, "As the waters of Noah shall cease for ever, so he will not forget the covenant of his peace; nothing shall pluck them out of his hand." Ah! say some, the apostle has said, "that neither things present, nor things to come, shall separate us from the love of Christ;" but he has not said an evil heart shall not. I fancy that is one of the "present things." The bush is not consumed, because if the devil is in the bush, God is in the bush too; if the devil acts one way, the Lord, the Spirit, acts another to balance it, and the Spirit of God is engaged to train up the souls of his people; and God has determined the bush shall not be consumed; his Spirit stands near believers to support and guide, and make them more than conquerors: all that are given to Jesus Christ shall come, he will not lose one of them. This is food for the children of God. A bad mind will turn every thing to poison; and if it were not for this, that God had promised to keep them, my soul within these thirty years would have sunk a thousand times over.

Come then, O suffering saints, to you the word of this salvation is sent. I do not know who of you are the followers of the Lamb; may the Spirit of the living God point them out; may every one be enabled to say, I am the man. O, says one, I have been watching and very attentive to night, but you have not mentioned my burnings; what do you think of my burning lusts? What do you think of my burning corruptions? What do you think of my burning pride? O, perhaps some of you will say, thank God, I have no pride at all; like the bishop of Cambray, as mentioned by Dr. Watts, who said, he had received many sins from his father Adam, but, thank God, he had no pride. Alas! alas! we are all as proud as the devil. Pray what do you think of passion, that burns not only themselves but all around them? What do you think of enmity? What do you think of jealousy, is not this something that burns the bush? And there are some people that pride themselves they have not got so much of the beast about them, they never got drunk, scorn to commit murder, and at the same time are as full of enmity, of envy, malice, and pride, as the devil. The Lord God help such to see their condition. Happy is it Christ can dwell in the bush, when we cannot dwell ourselves there. There are few

Christians can live together, very few relations can live together under one roof. We can take that from other people, that we cannot bear from our own flesh and blood; and if God did not bear with us more than we bear with one another, we should all have been destroyed every day. Does the devil make you say, that you will give all up; I will go to the Tabernacle no more; I will lay upon my couch, and take my case? Oh! if this is the case of any tonight, thus tempted by Satan, may God rescue their souls. O poor dear soul, you never will have such sweet words from God as when you are in the bush. Our suffering times will be our best times. I know we had more comfort in Moorfields, on Kennington-Common, and especially when the rotten eggs, the cats and dogs, were thrown upon me, and my gown was filled with clods of dirt that I could scarce move it. I have had more comfort in this burning bush, than when I have been in ease. I remember when I was preaching at Exeter, a stone came and made my forehead bleed. I found at that very time the word came with double power to a labourer that was gazing at me, who was wounded at the same time by another stone. I felt for the lad more than for myself, went to a friend, and the lad came to me, "Sir, says he, the man gave me a wound, but Jesus healed me; I never had my bonds broke, till I had my head broke.—I appeal to you, whether you were not better when it was colder than now, because your nerves were braced up; you have a day like a dog-day, now you are weak, and are obliged to fan yourselves: thus it is prosperity lulls the soul, and I fear Christians are spoiled by it.

Whatever your trials are, let this be your prayer, Lord, though the bush is burning, let it not be consumed. I think that is too low, let it be thus; Lord, when the bush is burning, let me not burn lower as the fire does, but let me burn higher and higher: I thank thee, my God, for trouble; I thank thee, my God, for putting me into these afflictions one after another; I thought I could sing a requiem to myself, that I should have a little rest, but trouble came from that very quarter where I might reasonably expect the greatest comfort: I thank thee for knocking my bands off from the creature. Lord, I believe, help my unbelief; and thus you will go on blessing God to all eternity: by and by the bush shall be translated to the paradise of God. No burning bush in heaven, except the fire of love, wonder, and gratitude; no trials there, troubles are limited to this earth; above, our enemies cannot reach us.

Perhaps there are some of you here are saying, Burning bush! a bush burnt, and not consumed! I do not know what to make of this nonsense. Come, come, go on, I am used to it, and I guess what are the thoughts of your hearts. I pray God, that every one of you here may be afraid of comfort, lest they should be tossed about by the devil. What is it I have said? How have I talked in such an unintelligible manner? Why, say you, what do you mean

by a burning bush? Why, thou art the very man, how so? Why, you are burning with the devil in your hearts! you are burning with foppery, with nonsense, with “the lust of the flesh,” with “the lust of the eye, and pride of life;” and if you do not get out of this state, as Lot said to his sons-in-law, ere long you shall be burning in hell, and not consumed: the same angel of the covenant who spake to Moses out of the bush, he shall ere long descend, surrounded with millions of the heavenly hosts, and sentence you to everlasting burnings. O you frighten me! Did you think I did not intend to frighten you? Would to God I might frighten you enough? I believe it will be no harm for you to be frightened out of hell, to be frightened out of an unconverted state. O go and tell your companions that the madman said, that wicked men are as firebrands of hell: God pluck you as brands out of that burning.

Blessed be God, that there is yet a day of grace; Oh! that this might prove “the accepted time;” Oh! that this might prove “the day of salvation;” Oh! Angel of the everlasting covenant, come down; thou blessed, dear comforter, have mercy, mercy, mercy upon the unconverted, upon our unconverted friends, upon the unconverted part of this auditory; “speak, and it shall be done; command, O Lord, and it shall come to pass;” turn the burning bushes of the devil into burning bushes of the Son of God: who knows but God may hear our prayer, who knows but God may hear this cry, “I have seen, I have seen the afflictions of my people; the cry of the children of Israel is come up to me, and I am come down to deliver them.” God grant this may be his word to you under all your trouble. God grant he may be your comforter. The Lord awaken you that are dead in sin, and though on the precipice of hell, God keep you from tumbling in: and you that are God’s burning bushes, God help you to stand to keep this coat of arms, to say when you go home. Blessed be God, “the bush is burning, but not consumed” *Amen!* even so, Lord Jesus. *Amen!*