

Sermons and Addresses

BY

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BRISTOL:

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LONDON:

S. W. PARTRIDGE & CO., 8 and 9, Paternoster Row;

THE BOOK SOCIETY, 28, Paternoster Row.

1898AD

Paul's Thorn in the Flesh.

A Sermon preached on Sunday evening, July 11th. 1897, at Bethesda Chapel, Great George Street, Bristol.

And, lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure.

For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.

And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.—2 Cor. xii. 7, 8, 9.

THE position in which the Apostle Paul stood was that though, with his might, he had sought to do everything he could for the church at Corinth, through false teachers, who had crept in unawares, he was calumniated, spoken against, looked down upon, rejected, and the like; and he was under the painful necessity, for the sake of the Gospel and for the glory of God, to speak about himself in a manner which he had never done before, to justify himself before these adversaries of the Gospel. And this is frequently the case, not merely with preachers of the Gospel and pastors of churches, but with children of God generally, that they are evil spoken of. "For I suppose I was not a whit behind the very chiefest apostles."

After reading to the end of verse 27, chapter xi., Mr. Müller went on to remark: Just think of it, that this holy man, one of the holiest men that ever lived on earth, had to suffer from hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness," being in the position that he could not have a comfortable place, being without in the cold, and with not sufficient warm clothing. "Besides those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? If I must needs glory, I will glory in the things which concern mine infirmities. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is blessed for evermore, knoweth that I lie not"

Commenting on the first six verses of the 12th chapter, Mr. Müller said:— He Himself was the person, but he does not say so; though it is obvious that he was the person. "Of such a one will I glory: yet of myself I will not glory, but in mine infirmities"—that is, he could have mentioned far more than this, but he would no longer speak about himself, lest any should form too high an opinion of him, which he did not wish to be the case.

“Lest I should be exalted above measure, through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me; and He said unto me, ‘My grace is sufficient for thee, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake, for when I am weak, then am I strong.” The confession of this holy man regarding his entire dependence on God, and his own weakness, yea nothingness, is especially to be treasured up in our own hearts, and we have to seek for grace to imitate him, in coming to the conclusion to which he came. “Lest I should be exalted above measure, through the abundance of the revelations.” Notice here, how this most holy man, the chief of all the apostles, had such a view regarding himself that he considered he was in danger of being “exalted above measure, through the abundance of the revelations;” through what God had done for him in taking him to Paradise, in taking him, who was yet in the body, to be in a place which was only fit for those who were no longer in the body. He tells us that he was in danger of being “exalted above measure.”

Now, if such a man of God as he was, “the chief of all the apostles,” the one who, in honesty of heart, could say about himself that he had “laboured more abundantly “than any of the apostles—if he could confess that he was in danger of being “exalted above measure,” what shall we weak ones, and feeble ones, in comparison with the Apostle Paul, say regarding ourselves? Most assuredly, if with any measure of truth and of uprightness of heart we have to make a confession regarding ourselves, we must say, “if Paul was in danger of being exalted above measure, a thousand times more may we be in danger of being exalted above measure, and of having too high an opinion about ourselves.”

Now, then, the remedy was provided, even for Paul, regarding this. “Lest I should be exalted above measure, through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh”—that is, a trial, and a very heavy trial, to counterbalance, that he might not be “exalted above measure.” We are not told what this thorn in the flesh was. That it was something very painful, very trying, we see by the figure which is used. Many of us may know from our own experience what it is to have a little splinter, or thorn, go into our hands, or any part of our body; how painful it is until the thorn, or the little splinter, is extracted—how exceedingly painful it is. Therefore, it was something extremely painful on purpose, we have reason to believe. We are not told what it was, for if we had been told

such a thing, or such a thing, or such a thing, then those who were not similarly situated might say, “O this might be borne,” or, “I could have borne it.” So, in order that none of us might say regarding ourselves, “O my trial is a different one, and a far heavier one,” we purposely are not informed what this thorn in the flesh was.

But evidently, by the very figure which is used, it was something extremely trying that he had to bear day by day, week after week, month after month. This thorn in the flesh is called, “The messenger of Satan,” because through the instrumentality of Satan came the trial. All trials that come upon us, in our family, in our business, in our health, and in other ways, come directly, or indirectly, through the instrumentality of the Wicked One. Our Heavenly Father tries to make us pass through this life pleasantly, easily, happily, without having trials and afflictions; but Satan hates us, exceedingly hates us, because he knows that we are no longer belonging to his kingdom—we who put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. We no longer belong to him.

That he will not have us at last for eternity, to torment us, to make us wretched and miserable, he knows; and therefore, as he cannot have us then, he seeks to make us in this life, while we are in the body, as unhappy as he possibly can. He tries to afflict us, to torment us, to the very uttermost that he has permission to do; for we have ever to keep before us that he can do nothing against us, unless he obtains first permission from God. A most striking illustration of this we have in the case of Job. Satan had been trying to get at him, but was unable to do so; he had been trying to injure him, his family, his property, but he could not do so, and he was constrained to make a confession, “Hast Thou not set a hedge round about him?” That is, he had often and often unquestionably tried to get at Job, but could not by reason of the protection which God gave to His holy servant. And therefore he says, “Thou hast set a hedge round about him,” which implies, “I have often tried to get at him, but I was unable to do so.” And this hedge is never broken down, except by the permission of God. A wall of fire is round about us, and Satan dare not touch us, except God gives permission; and this permission is never, *never*, NEVER given, except God has determined to rule it all for the confounding of Satan, and for our real good and blessing and comfort. So that we come under this precious promise, “All things work together for good to them that love God.”

If Satan is permitted to break down the hedge, this permission is only given for the purpose of confounding him, and of bringing more blessing to us out of it than if the hedge were not broken. O how precious the position of the children of God! And if every one knew what it means to be a child of God, every one most earnestly would seek to become a child of God. But

because it is not known, we are naturally blinded, we have no proper Scriptural idea of what it implies to be a child of God; therefore we care not about it, we treat the matter with indifference. But all those who are made to see their lost and ruined condition by nature, all those who have turned to find out, in any goodly measure, that they are sinners, and that they deserve nothing but punishment, and who own this before God in prayer, and then put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for the salvation of their souls, become happy, happy, happy beings They are blessed, and truly blessed, and no other persons are really and truly blessed and really and truly happy until they come to this!

Therefore, should there be any here present who have not found out yet that they *are* sinners, *great* sinners, deserving nothing but punishment, let them pray to God that He will be pleased, in the riches of His grace, to show it to them, and when they have come to see it, then humble themselves before God, make confession of their sinfulness before Him, and ask His merciful forgiveness. When they are come as far as this, they have further to put their trust alone in Jesus Christ for the salvation of their souls. Being brought thus far, they are regenerated; through this trust in the Lord Jesus Christ they become a new creation, they become children of God, they obtain spiritual life, they are now born again, they belong no longer to the world, and they stand as justified ones before God, through the righteousness of the Lord Jesus, and they are forgiven ones by reason of the atonement which the Lord Jesus Christ made in their room and stead. For He not only fulfilled the law, He also bore its punishment, and on this account we shall not be condemned, because the Lord Jesus Christ bore all the punishment which we guilty sinners ought to have borne; and this belongs not merely to one or the other, not merely to a few thousands of human beings, but belongs to every one whose eyes have been spiritually opened to see his lost condition, and who really has trusted in Jesus for salvation. Now, being brought on the road to heaven, having obtained spiritual life, as assuredly as we continue putting our trust alone in Jesus Christ, we shall at last reach glory.

“There was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan, to buffet me.” This figure is particularly to be noticed. “Beats me with his fists,” that is the literal meaning of “to buffet me.” “Beats me with his fists.” This figure implies the greatness of the trial, the greatness of the suffering, that he had to endure from this “messenger of Satan,” from this evil angel, this evil spirit. And this buffeting was, “Lest I should be exalted above measure”—that is, God allows it in order that on no account the Apostle Paul should be exalted; that he might be kept in real, true humility of soul, that he might have a lowly view about himself. Now let us not

forget this, that if such an exceedingly holy man as was the Apostle Paul was in danger of being “exalted above measure on account of the abundance of the revelations” which he had had, how much more is this the case regarding ourselves? Now, what did this man of God do under these circumstances? “For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me.”

Because this “messenger of Satan” was so very trying, the sufferings were so exceedingly great, he, with earnestness, besought God that it might be taken from him. When it is stated here he “besought the Lord thrice,” he did not for five minutes ask God three times, but we have reason to believe it means in a solemn way, most earnestly, at three different times he besought the Lord that it might depart from him. This is what we have to do, to come to the Lord under trial and affliction, and beseech Him to take it away. And if the prayer, once prayed before God, is not enough, to bring it the second time, to bring it the third time, to bring it the thirtieth time, to bring it the fiftieth time before the Lord, until we plainly see that He has something better for us, and therefore does not take it away. But until we are instructed about this, we may go on praying that God graciously would take away the heavy trial, the heavy affliction.

Now, in the 9th verse we see what the Lord Himself says, “And He said unto me, ‘My grace is sufficient for thee, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’” Grace is sufficient for every trial and every affliction, because, obtaining grace, we get the Holy Spirit as the Comforter, as the Strengthener, of the inner life, the divine life, the spiritual life we have obtained; and He leads us on spiritually and helps us under all circumstances, under all trials, under all afflictions, of whatever character they may be. Therefore the great point is this, “Are we partakers of grace?” Then, and only then, have we obtained spiritual life. Only then are we regenerated, only then are we warranted to look at ourselves as the children of God, and as pardoned sinners through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. O how precious is this, that as partakers of grace we are helped for time and for eternity. When once brought to this, we are no longer in nature's darkness, we no longer belong to the kingdom of Satan, but to the kingdom of God. We then are the children of God, and as such the heirs of God, and joint-heirs with the Lord Jesus Christ. We then for eternity have the Lord Jesus as our Friend, as our Helper, as our Comforter, as our Guide, as our Counsellor, and as the One Who will watch over us and never leave us or hide Himself away from us, in order that He may shield and protect us against the powers of darkness. O the blessedness of such a position!

Now I ask, before going any further, “Are you partakers of this grace?” I have been through the wondrous mercy of God, in this state to which I have

referred, for 71 years and 8 months. And as God has bestowed this wondrous blessing on me, He is willing to bestow it on anyone who is yet without peace. We must obtain this blessing if we desire to go to heaven at last! There is no such thing as obtaining this blessing when once we have passed out of time into eternity. In the world to come there is no seeking after Christ; in the world to come there is no such thing as being regenerated; in the world to come there is no such thing as obtaining forgiveness for our sins, if we do not obtain forgiveness before passing out of time into eternity! Now, then, ask yourselves, I beseech and entreat all of you who are not certain on Scriptural grounds that you have obtained the blessing—ask yourselves, “How is it with me, and shall I still go on without this blessing, and treat it yet with indifference as I have done for a long time?” O, on no account delay to care about your souls. The present moment is ours, and the present moment *alone* is ours. How it may be after a single hour, who will tell us? Often, often it has happened that persons who were at a religious meeting were one hour afterwards no longer in the land of the living. Now, I do not say that this will be the case with any here present tonight; but because of the possibility, therefore let us, on no account, delay to care about our souls.

“My grace is sufficient for thee.” Paul had obtained grace; that meant in every position in life that he could need it, though he had “the thorn in the flesh,” grace was given to him to counteract. Though he had “the messenger of Satan” sent to him, yet grace could counteract this. Though he was “beaten with fists,” greatly afflicted, greatly tried, yet grace was sufficient to meet all. “My grace is sufficient for thee, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” That means “My power is just seen more abundantly on account of thy weakness; thou art a weak one in thyself, thou hast no strength in thyself, but the power is Mine, and My power shall be made manifest in thy weakness.” Now, what decision did Paul come to when this was told him? “Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in mine infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” “I will no longer be tried, though I have this ‘thorn in the flesh;’ I will no longer be tried by ‘this messenger of Satan to buffet me;’ I will rejoice rather than be tried, by reason of what I have, through the grace of God, to strengthen me.”

“Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in mine infirmities, that the power of Christ may dwell in me,” for this is the meaning of to “rest upon me.” Dwell in me, that I may be a partaker of the power of Christ, through the grace bestowed on me. We weak ones, and feeble ones, may therefore say to ourselves, “In myself I am extremely weak, in myself I am nothing, I can do nothing, I have no power of my own; but the power of Christ dwells in me, through the Holy Ghost being given to me.” O how precious! And

the Holy Spirit we have individually, as assuredly as we have owned before God that we are sinners, and trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ for the salvation of our souls. That brings this wondrous blessing to us, and the power of Christ dwells in us, in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

“Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake, for when I am weak, then am I strong.” See what effect this had had upon the Apostle Paul, when once he knew that the very way of obtaining great blessing, exceeding great blessing, was just the position in which he was, because he was a partaker of the grace of God, and that therefore he should never be left nor forsaken! He could then come to the conclusion, “I take pleasure in infirmities.” “Take pleasure in infirmities”—that is, when weak in body he took pleasure in his weakness, because the power of Christ dwelt in him. “I take pleasure in reproaches.” He was called “a fool,” “a madman,” “a good-for-nothing fellow,” “not fit to live;” these reproaches were heaped upon him, but the Apostle Paul now says, “I take pleasure in these reproaches; yea, though men reproach me, to make me wretched and miserable, they only make me happy by the reproaches which they heap upon me, because I know what blessing all this in the end will bring.” Then, he further says, “I take pleasure in necessities.” When I am hungry, when I have not sufficient food, when I have no proper clothing to warm and to shield me against the inclemencies of the weather, or, when in other respects, I am in necessities, I take pleasure in them, because I now see that this is the very opportunity given to the Lord Jesus Christ, Who by the power of His Spirit dwells in me, and this power dwells in me to help me, to comfort me, and to bring a blessing to my soul.

In persecutions he could now take pleasure. No longer complaining of being dissatisfied because he was persecuted, but taking pleasure in it, because it gave to the Lord Jesus Christ an opportunity of manifesting His power. Then he says, “I take pleasure in distresses, for Christ's sake.” Not in distresses on account of having acted improperly, imprudently, but for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ. If he were in distress he would take pleasure in it, for it would bring blessing to his soul. And the whole is wound up with this, “For when I am weak, then am I strong;” because of the power of the Lord Jesus Christ dwelling in him. Now, our comfort is particularly this, that these glorious statements referred not merely to such a one as the Apostle Paul was, but they refer to the weakest, feeblest, least instructed child of God; yea, they belong to the new-born babe in Christ who but this morning was brought to the knowledge of Jesus Christ. O how precious is all this; and when we appropriate these things to ourselves, we are no longer cast down, we become peaceful and happy, very peaceful and

very happy. We glory in the greatest trials and difficulties, because we see they are all appointed for our good and blessing and profit, and they all give to the Lord Jesus Christ the opportunity of manifesting His power in reference to ourselves. They give Him also an opportunity of manifesting His matchless care and love, which He has for the weakest and feeblest of His children.

Now our business is to enter into all this, and if, as yet we are unable to do so, to ask the Lord to strengthen us, by His Holy Spirit, that we may comprehend all that which is contained in these few verses on which we have now meditated; and, in doing so, lasting, lasting and abiding blessing will come to our souls.