

STRANGE DISPENSATIONS AND MATCHLESS CONSOLATIONS

NO. 2754

A SERMON
 INTENDED FOR READING ON LORD'S-DAY, NOVEMBER 24, 1901
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 AT NEW PARK STREET CHAPEL, SOUTHWARK
 ON A LORD'S-DAY EVENING, IN THE AUTUMN OF 1859

“Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her.”
Hosea 2:14

THIS is one of the many instances in the Word of God of His free, rich, sovereign grace. The Lord has set the children of Israel before us as a great model. They are our beacons with regard to sin, but they are a pattern to us when we see in them the gracious dealings of a covenant-keeping God. Often did they rebel, but just as often did the Lord forgive them. Frequently did He smite them with His rod, but He never turned them over to destruction. He still remembered His covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and He suffered not His faithfulness to fail.

We have, in the prophecy of Hosea, an instance of what God thought of the sins of His people. He commands the prophet to speak in rough earnest language of their constant rebellion. And yet, no sooner has He directed Hosea to deal hardily with His erring spouse, than He seems to stop him in the middle of his furious prophecy and bids him now address her with words of comfort.

This is the connection in which our text is found set in the black letters of the volume of threatenings against guilty Israel. This precious jewel shines all the more brightly in the thick darkness of their sin and despair. This torch of love and kindness sheds a heavenly light, and makes their eyes and hearts rejoice.

Let us now turn to these words of the Lord and regard them under the following aspects. First, I see, in the text, *the singular reasons for divine grace*. “Therefore, behold!” I see, in the next place, *the strange dispensations of divine grace*. “I will bring her into the wilderness.” In the third place, *matchless consolations*. “I will speak comfortably unto her.” And in the fourth place, *sweet persuasions*, “I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her.”

I. In the first place, we have, in our text, THE SINGULAR REASONS FOR DIVINE GRACE. “Therefore, behold!”

It is not without cause that the word “therefore” is inserted here. We are to look to the context to find *what are the premises from which a conclusion of mercy is drawn*. You might naturally conceive, judging according to human logic, that the preceding verses described either Israel's goodness, or else her abject repentance, if she has gone astray and rebelled.

But on the contrary, there is no mention of these things at all. They speak not of her goodness, but of her badness. And in fact, they speak so strongly that the prophet uses terms that are never employed except after excessive iniquity. He charges Israel with whoredom and speaks of her as having committed uncleanness with many lovers.

This is strong language and shows that he means to declare the excessive character of her sin. And instead of speaking of her as being a penitent, he declares that she was still impenitent. Notwithstanding many, many providences and the hedging up of her way with thorns, she would break through and run after her many false lovers. And then, strange to say, contrary to all human reasoning, there comes the inference, if I may so call it—an inference of sunshine from a dark cloud, an inference of mercy from a whole mass of sin and iniquity.

If the inference had been, “Therefore I will destroy her, I will cut her in pieces, and give her children to the sword, and her women to be carried away captive,” our reason could well have seen that it was the natural consequence, we could easily have seen that the logical terms agreed. But here it seems as if it were quite a *non sequitur*. How can it be that a “therefore” should spring up, when the previous verses have been filled with a description of her sins?

Here let us pause to remember that *the reasons for God’s grace to us are far above all human reason*, for He Himself has told us, “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Nay, I will go further than this and say that not only are God’s modes of reasoning far above our own, but *they often seem as if they were even contradictory to ours*. Where we should draw one inference, God draws the very opposite.

See yon poor penitent sinner? He “would not lift up so much as his eyes to heaven; but he smote upon his breast, and cried, God be merciful to me a sinner.” What is our inference from this, looking at the publican as he stands there? Why, that he is a rebellious creature, and that God cannot and will not accept him, but must punish him. Does God draw this inference? Nay, for “this man went down to his house justified.”

See yonder Pharisee. With outstretched hands he stands and prays thus with himself, “God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are,” and so on. What is our inference therefrom? Surely God will accept so good a man as this. He will be sure to justify a man so holy and so moral. Not so, for that man went down to his house without justification, unsatisfied, unblessed with the smile of heaven—while yon sorrowing publican received God’s gracious forgiveness.

We, ever since the Fall, have learned to reason badly. Our reasoning faculty has been as much confused as any other power that we possessed. We have turned aside from the straightforward path and we know not how to draw the true inference which God draws from our sins. So, then, it seems from our text, that so far from looking at any reason for mercy to anything that is good in man—if God ever seeks in the creature a reason why He should show mercy, He looks not to the good, but to the evil.

When we come before God, it would be well if we would always remember this. We are committing great folly if, when we are spreading our case before Him, we dare for one moment to speak of ourselves as good or excellent. We shall never succeed in that way—He will not listen to us, for this plan has no power with Him.

But if, when we come to Him, we can plead our sin and our misery, then shall we prevail. Nay, we may even go the length of the psalmist David, when he prayed, “For thy name’s sake, O LORD, pardon mine iniquity”—and for a strange reason, you would say—“for it is great.” He used the greatness of his sin as an argument why God should have mercy on him.

O you legalists, who are looking to yourselves for some arguments with which to prevail with God. O you who look to your sacraments, to your outward forms, to your pious deeds, and your almsgivings, for something that will move the heart of God—know this, that these things are no lever that can ever move Him to love. Nothing but your sin and misery can ever stir His mercy. And you look to the wrong place when you look to your merits to find a plea why He should show pity upon you.

And yet, albeit that this reasoning seems extremely strange, I may use an illustration which will justify such reasoning as this in the mind of every thoughtful man. Here is a poor creature shivering in the cold with nakedness. And there is one who has warm garments to give away. Will not the nakedness of the man be his claim to benevolence?

If there is any generous soul who desires to feed the hungry, it is not likely that he will bestow his bread upon one that has abundance. But if he hears a soul uttering the wail which is excited by the pangs of hunger, that very wail shall make him move his hands to supply the needed food. Generosity, liberality, and mercy know of nothing that can move them as misery can, and the very reverse argument is formed from that which men are so fond of using.

They will go to God with a plea analogous to this—as if a beggar should meet me in the street, and say, “Sir, give me charity. I am not very poor, I am not very hungry, *therefore* give me charity.” He

would not use such a foolish argument as that. He, like a wise man, says, “I am hungry, I am starving, *therefore* give me food.”

Would that you would use the same sensible argument when you come before God and plead, not for your merit’s sake, but for your misery’s sake. Think not that you are to tip the arrows of your prayers with the feathers of your own merit—that shall never make them fly to heaven. It will be better if you can wing them with a sense of your own miseries, for then they shall reach the heart of God and He will send you the promised blessing in return.

Strange reasoning, you say, this of grace—that God will save men, not for their goodness, but if there is any reason that can be found in them, it is rather for their sin and for their misery than for anything good in them.

If you will carefully look at the text again, you will notice that after the word “therefore” there comes a word of exclamation—“behold!” Whenever we see the word “behold” in Scripture, we may be sure that there is something well worthy of our attention. It strikes me that Hosea, when the Lord commanded him to write this verse, was quite staggered.

“Lord,” said he, “how can this be?” He was filled with amazement. “I have been threatening Your children. You have told me to set their iniquities before their face and now you bid me say, ‘*Therefore* I will have mercy upon them.’” The conclusion seemed to him so strange that he was utterly astonished. And the Lord permitted His servant to record his astonishment by putting in that word “behold.”

Nor do I think that is the only reason for the use of the word. It is also, I think, put there that we may admire the grace here displayed and that we may remember the mercy of God—and especially the deep-rooted secret reasons for that mercy. They will continue to be, on earth, the theme of admiration and in heaven itself, the object of eternal astonishment.

When we shall be permitted to see why God had mercy upon man, and especially why, out of the human race, he had mercy upon us—why He chose us while others were suffered to perish—we shall be compelled incessantly to lift up our hands in astonishment, and even in the heavenly city itself joy shall sometimes be superseded by wonder, and we shall, even there, be astonished to find such matchless grace displayed for such singular reasons.

“Therefore, behold!” Again I would say to those who are trusting in themselves—Give up your foolish hopes. Men and brethren, look not to the empty cisterns, but come away at once to the fountain, the divine, kingly fount of sovereign grace, for there, and there only, it is that your hope of pardon can be realized. For, in yourself, there is nothing but that which would lead to your destruction—and only in JEHOVAH can reasons for salvation be discovered.

II. The second point is THE STRANGE DISPENSATIONS OF DIVINE GRACE.

God is about to have mercy upon poor fallen Israel, so what does He say? “I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness.” This may seem to some a strange way of showing His love, yet it is not an unusual one, for it is the common method by which God manifests His love towards His chosen ones. You will, perhaps, smile when I make the observation that there was nothing which a Roman slave more anxiously desired than to have a box on the ear from his master.

“That was a strange desire,” you will say, yet that box on the ear was the object of the morning and evening prayer of many a slave in Rome, for you must know, if a master once gave his servant a box on the ear, he was free from that day forth and was no longer a slave. Now, that strange manner of manumitting a slave is analogous to that which God uses when He is about to set free one of Satan’s bondsmen.

He first of all gives us the blow of *conviction* and then He gives us the liberty of grace. Is it not singular that God should begin to show His love to His people by taking them into the wilderness? Is it not a strange manifestation of divine favor that He should bring us, not into Canaan, not to the grapes of Eshcol, not to all the riches of the land which flowed with milk and honey, but that He should bring us, first of all, into the wilderness?

Your experience, if you are a child of God, will help you to understand this. “The wilderness” may be explained thus—when God is about to save a man, He first of all brings him into a *state of spiritual destitution*. He thinks himself rich, and increased in goods, and that he has need of nothing. Talk to him about the sinful state of a natural man and he is insulted. He says he is as good as his neighbors, he does not know that he has much to confess when he is on his knees. Indeed, he hardly sees the use of confessing to God at all. If such as he do not get to heaven at last, he does not know who will!

Now, when God means to have mercy upon a man of that sort, instead of feeling that he has every virtue and all strength, on a sudden he finds himself without one good thing to recommend him to God. And worse than this, he finds that he has no strength to perform a single good act. “Oh!” says he, “I once thought I could repent and believe whenever I pleased, but now all my strength is gone, my heart is hard and I can scarcely compel a tear to flow. I imagined that in the last moment of my life, I could say, ‘O God, have mercy upon me!’ and that, then, I should be saved. But now, I find faith to be quite another thing from what I thought it was. Now I am stripped of all self-confidence, my comeliness is departed, I must robe myself in sackcloth, and cast dust and ashes upon my head. My soul is spiritually shut up. I find no food, nothing comes from within, and nothing comes from without.” This state of spiritual destitution is set forth by this wilderness state.

Moreover, by the wilderness, doubtless, is meant *affliction*, for full often, when God means to bring a man to Himself, He sends affliction upon him. This is the good Shepherd’s black dog with which He brings His wandering sheep back to Him. It comes howling after us, and biting at our heels, and then we fly away to Christ.

How many are there among you who were first brought to repentance by the loss of your property or the death of someone dear to you! If everything had gone on smoothly, the stream would have wafted you along down to the gulf of black despair. But on a sudden, the flood boiled around you and the tempest gathered above your devoted head. Then you cried unto God in your trouble, your losses were more than recompensed—your God was found and your soul was saved.

Happy are you who lose a fortune to find a Savior! Blessed is the burial of a friend or relative that leads to the new birth of our own souls and brings us to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ! We have, many of us, great cause to bless that rough right hand of God which has smitten us so sternly, but which has always been moved with love whenever it has given us a blow of chastisement.

Further, I think this wilderness may mean, not only spiritual destitution and affliction, but also *loneliness*. When God means to save a man, He always makes that man to feel himself to be all alone. There was a time with me, I know, when I went up to the house of God and I knew not whether there was anyone else there while the sermon was being delivered.

I seemed to be shut in by a black wall while the minister’s eye appeared to be looking down into my soul. I believed that the good man meant me when he used the word sinner—I could not think he was referring to anybody else. I loved not society, but was always seeking solitary places for prayer, trying to draw near to God in prayer, to tell Him my wants and to ask for His mercy.

It is a happy sign when the divine Hunter singles out one from the herd. He looks round, singles out His prey, and hunts him until, at last, He brings him down and carries him home rejoicing. The deer, when wounded, retires to weep, and bleed, and die alone—and so, too, hearts when wounded love shady solitudes, that they may weep alone before God. This is, I believe, the meaning of, “I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness.”

I will give you one more picture and then I think I shall have described this wilderness sufficiently. Can you, for a moment, imagine yourself taken away, on a sudden, and carried by some giant hand swiftly through the air and deposited in the midst of the Desert of Sahara? You look around you and there is nothing to be seen that can afford you hope.

Above you is the burning vault of heaven with the furnace sun sending forth its fire upon you. Beneath you is the arid sand with no track of a traveler anywhere. At first you rush on, hoping soon to

find the desert's verge and to escape. Night succeeds day, and in the thick darkness you still travel on—fear and hope together winging your feet.

Day dawns again, but you are as far from deliverance as ever. And I can imagine that, with your throat parched and with your soul melted within you, you would cast yourself down upon the sand and cry, "Lost, lost, lost!" The echo of your words would come back to you from the burning heaven above you and you would be the complete picture of despair—lost, lost, lost!

Yet this is where God brings the man whom He means to save. He puts him into such a position that above him seems to be an angry God, beneath him a desert of sin, and not a glimpse of hope—and he lies down, helpless and despairing, and cries, "Lost, lost, lost!"

My hearer, are you in such a position? Then, remember that the Son of man has come to seek and to save that which was lost, and that you are one of those whom He came to save, for you are manifestly lost. He will never be disappointed with the result of His work. Those whom He come to save, He will save. And if you trust Him, He will save you, you shall be brought in among His redeemed people here on earth, and you shall see His face, and rejoice in His great salvation, in the day when He shall come in the glory of His Father with all His holy angels with Him.

III. Now, note the next division of the passage—GOD'S MATCHLESS CONSOLATIONS.

Does He bring her into the wilderness that she may be the prey of the vultures or that the jackals may devour her? Oh, no! He brings her there that He may "speak comfortably unto her." You see how the two things go together. There is a precious golden band in the text—a band which neither death nor hell can ever shatter, which, like a sacred rivet or heavenly link, joins the two sentences together.

"I will bring her into the wilderness"—that is true, we know—"and I will speak comfortably unto her." That is also true. The two are linked together and cannot be separated. Those who are brought into such a wilderness as I have described, shall hear the comforting words of JEHOVAH spoken to their hearts.

Now, with regard to these comforts, I would remark that they are *sure comforts*. We may take the words "I will," which stand at the beginning of the verse, as relating to each clause, and therefore we may read it, "I *will* speak comfortably unto her." Therefore we have, first of all, sure mercies—"I *will*." Good old Joseph Irons used to say, "Our *shalls* and *wills* are impotent and impracticable, but God's *shalls* and *wills* are omnipotent."

Has He said it and shall it not be done? Has He decreed it, or promised it, and shall it not stand fast? Rest assured, poor soul, that whatever may not be or whatever may be, if you are brought into the wilderness by God, He will assuredly speak comfortably unto you there. It may be a long while that you will have to wait, but though the promise tarries, wait for it, for the time for its fulfillment shall surely come—it shall not fail. In due season, the Lord will remember you and will not forget you in your low estate, for His mercy endures forever and His faithfulness knows no end. He will speak comfortably unto you.

Note next, that they are not only sure consolations, but *divine consolations*. "I will speak comfortably unto her." Many ministers have tried what they could do to cheer the sad, but they have done nothing. I have never learned so much of my own weakness as when, in preaching, I have sought to comfort some of God's tried ones.

I have sometimes, in my sermons, put in a little honey on purpose for them, but somehow, that honey has seemed to ferment and become sour, so that they could not feed upon it. I have talked with them and done all I could to comfort them, and sometimes, I have had to turn them over to my brethren in the eldership, and they have done their best—and failed.

What, then, shall I say, Lord? Your poor servant can do nothing here. Will You do it, Lord? Will you, O blessed Spirit, who are the Comforter, take them by the hand and "speak comfortably" unto them? If You do speak, they cannot refuse to hear, and then shall they indeed be comforted. O poor, tried Soul, is not this a rich promise, indeed? "I will speak comfortably unto her." He will not merely

send you an angel or minister to comfort them, but He will Himself do the work—“I will speak comfortably unto her.”

The third remark I make upon these consolations is that they are *effectual consolations*. The Hebrew bears the interpretation, “I will speak *to her heart*.” We speak to your ears, but God speaks to your heart. Oh, what speaking that is, when God speaks right from His heart into our hearts! Some of us have experienced this at times. We have found the Word of God to well up, as it were, from Him, and then, as it has welled up, it has gone down deep into our hearts and we have been made to drink of it to the very full.

“I will speak to her heart.” Poor soul, if you are brought into the wilderness, God will effectually comfort you. He has effectually convicted you and He will effectually console you. If He has brought you into the wilderness of humility and sore distress, He will as surely bring you into the Canaan of faith and joy.

I remark, in the next place, that these consolations are not only sure, divine, and effectual, but they are *full*. “I will speak comfortably unto her.” What rich words of comfort are those which God addresses to His people! He pardons them, He justifies them, He sanctifies them, He preserves them, He upholds them, He prevents them, He brings them safely home at last, and all this He speaks to the heart of the poor, tried, and tempted soul in the wilderness—and thus He makes it “rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.”

It is not in my power, my dear friends, to speak to your hearts. I can only speak to your outward ear. But let me repeat some of those things which God says when He speaks to the heart. “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

“I even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.” “Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.” “Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.” “He is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.” Thus God speaks rich promises of pardon and forthwith He says, “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you.”

How sweetly He speaks concerning the trials and troubles of this world! “Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me.” And how graciously He tells His people, “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.” And how comfortably does He remind His people that, come what may, they shall still be secure! “When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the fire kindle upon thee.”

And then, when His poor people think He can hardly remember them, He says, “Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.”

And then, lest even this should be of no avail, He says, “The mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the LORD that hath mercy on thee.” “For this is as the waters of Noah unto me: for as I have sworn that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth; so have I sworn that I would not be wroth with thee, nor rebuke thee.”

Truly did I speak, when I remarked that this consolation is full, and well does one of our poets express the same sentiment when he says,—

*“What more can He say than to you He hath said,
You who unto Jesus for refuge have fled?”*

We have a Bible that cannot be enlarged. We have promises that cannot be extended. We have blessings that cannot be exaggerated. And imagination’s utmost stretch could not make us conceive of

anything beyond. Oh! may God, who has brought you into the wilderness of sore trouble, bring each one now present into His gracious presence, that you may know that He Himself thus speaks comfortably unto you!

IV. Now I close by coming back to the first clause of the text, and meditating on THE SWEET PERSUASIONS with which God draws us to Himself. "I will allure her."

There are many who are very much afraid they are not converted, because they have not had a thunder-and-lightning experience—they were not converted in stormy weather—they had not the terrors of the law and the shaking over hell's mouth that some have experienced. They have read of John Bunyan and his desperate struggles, but they have not gone through anything of the kind. They can say that they have felt their need of a Savior and realized their sin, but the accounts they have heard of what others have known of the terrors of hell have been so impressed upon them that they have feared that they could not be God's people.

Read our text. It says, "I will allure her." It does not say, "I will drive her." It does not say, "I will drag her." It does not even say, "I will compel her." It does not say, "I will make her run into the wilderness for fear of Me." No, but the Lord says, "I will allure her."

What does this mean? I cannot explain it better than by a very simple figure. I see the fowlers come, sometimes, to Clapham Common. I once saw a man with a robin redbreast in a cage. This poor little bird was made to sing and so tried to decoy other birds from the sky. The fowler was luring birds, catching them by the lure—and, my brethren, this is how God brings many of His children to Himself.

We have all been like wild birds, but He has converted some of us by His grace and put us into the cage of the pulpit—and made us sing as best we can, so as to lure poor sinners to come to the divine Fowler, the Lord Jesus Christ. I wish I could sing better. I would that I were a better decoy, that I might bring more to Jesus.

Many a sister has been a decoy to her brother. Many a wife has lured her husband to Christ. You cannot drag them, but you may draw them. All that you can do, in your daily life, and in your house, or wherever else you may meet with these poor worldlings, is to lure them to Christ by letting them hear how sweetly you sing and see how happy you are, even while you are, as they say, a poor caged bird. Let them see how you enjoy your liberty in Christ, and so seek, with all earnestness, to bring them also to the Savior.

There is another figure which will explain the Lord's words, "I will allure her." When your little children are learning to walk, they are set up by the side of the table. They are quite frightened at first, for they have hardly tried their little legs yet. The nurse desires that the child may walk a little way. Well, what does she do? She holds out an apple, or a sweetmeat, to tempt it, and it tries to come to her, but it is ready to fall—so the nurse's finger is held out and the child is supported. It rests a moment and it is lured on again, with some toy or picture, something that tempts it on—and thus it learns to walk.

Possibly you say that I ought not to use such a simple figure. No, but I ought, for it is used in Scripture—"I taught Ephraim to go, taking them by their arms," just as a father might hold up his little one by the arms and let its feet just lightly touch the ground. The Lord condescends thus to speak, and surely I may do the same.

May not a man speak thus with his fellows? Yes, surely this is the way in which God brings many of His children to Christ. He lures them. He does not thunder forth and frighten them, but He tempts them on by mercies and baits of heavenly pleasure—and so are they drawn to the cross of Christ.

Some have been lured by the sweetness of the character of Christ. They have taken His yoke upon them, because He is "meek and lowly in heart," and they have found rest unto their souls. Others have been lured by the blessings of religion. They have said, "Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace," and have said to the people of God, "We will go with you."

Many have been lured by the prospect of heaven and the joy which has been set before them. And they have counted their lives as less than nothing in order that they might first suffer the reproach of

Christ and then inherit His glory. Do not be cast down because you have not had a terrible experience. Perhaps you are among those whom God sweetly lured to Himself.

So I conclude my discourse by bidding every Christian here to go forth and endeavor to lure poor souls to Christ. You must alter the shape of that face of yours that is so long and miserable. You are not luring souls to Christ—you are doing quite the reverse—you will drive them away from Him. Put away, I beseech you, that constant habit of murmuring and grumbling at everything and everybody.

Come, take your harp down from the willows and sing us one of the songs of Zion. Let us have no more groaning—that will frighten away the poor wild birds. They see your misery and how can they be lured to come when they see you so unhappy? I think that the long faces of God's people do a good deal of mischief. I see nothing to cause them, but just the reverse. Our Lord Jesus says that the hypocrites are of a sad countenance, so I should not like to have a sad countenance, for fear any man should think me a hypocrite.

What does He further say? “But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face: that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.” Do not let the worldling know that you are fasting. If you have troubles, keep them within you, do not let him know of them—let him see a happy exterior. In this way, you will allure him to Christ.

And take care, by the gentleness and kindness of your conversation, to bring him to think of that religion which he has hitherto rejected. I have heard it related of some Methodist that, after praying a long while for his wife's conversion, he threatened to beat her if she were not converted in a certain time. I believe she was not converted—that was not the way to bring her to the Savior. Instead of wooing sinners and alluring them, there are some who, if they do not go to the length of physical force, nevertheless seem as if they would bully them to Christ, they speak to them so sharply and sternly.

There is never any good done in that way. There are more flies caught with honey than with vinegar, and more souls are brought to Christ by sweet words than by sour and bitter ones. Let our life be like that of Christ—“holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners”—and then, added to this, let us have a heavenly cheerfulness about us which will lead others to see that, though our religion takes away from us the pleasures of the wicked, it gives us something so much better that Isaac Watts was right when he said—

*“Religion never was design'd
To make our pleasures less.”*

Go, beloved, and lure others to Christ. And may God the Holy Spirit bless each one of you! If in the wilderness, may He speak comfortably to you. If hardened in your sin, may He bring you into the wilderness. And if He has already spoken comfortably to you, may He help you to speak comfortably to others! Amen.

EXPOSITION BY C. H. SPURGEON

LUKE 9:51-56

Verse 51. *And it came to pass, when the time was come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem,*

It is a very remarkable expression that is here used—“when the time was come that he should be received up.” It does not say, “that he should depart,” or “that he should die.” It leaps over that and speaks only of His glorious ascension into heaven. When that time was drawing near—and of course, His death would come before it—Christ “stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem,” where He knew that He should die upon the cross.

52-53. *And sent messengers before his face: and they went, and entered into a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him. And they did not receive him, because his face was as though he would go to Jerusalem.*

And of course, Jerusalem was a sort of rival of Samaria. And if He was going there to worship, they did not want Him to stay with them. Yet the Samaritans were believers in the first five Books of the Bible. They accepted the Pentateuch, and they ought therefore to have practiced hospitality, imitating Abraham's noble example. They erred both against their own Scriptures and against the dictates of humanity when they refused to receive Christ because He was on His way to Jerusalem.

54. *And when his disciples James and John saw this, they said, Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did?*

James and John, two of the most loving of Christ's disciples. John, the most loving of all, startles us all by failing in the matter of love, and so being as bad as the Samaritans themselves. I have often noticed that very "liberal-minded" people, who denounce bigotry in general, do it with about seven times as much bigotry as those who are out-and-out bigots. In fact, it is a wonderfully easy thing to be a bigot against all bigotry, and to be illiberal towards everybody except fellow-liberals.

Well, that is a pity. It is better far to have the spirit of Christ, even when the Samaritans refuse to exercise hospitality. At any rate, let them live.

You notice that John quotes the example of Elijah and this should teach us that the best men mentioned in Scripture did things which we may not copy, and that they did some things right, which it would be wrong for us to do. Under special inspiration of God, Elijah, the prophet of fire, may call down fire from heaven—but you and I must not do so—we are not sent for any such purpose. Let us, therefore, be cautious how we make even prophets our exemplars in everything.

55-56. *But he turned and rebuked them, and said, Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.*

If that principle had been always remembered and followed, there would have been no persecution. To cause a man to suffer in his person or in his estate, because of his religious opinions, be they what they may, is a violation of Christianity. Consciences belong to God alone, and it is not for us to be calling for fire, the stake, the rack, or imprisonment, for men because they do not believe as we do. "The Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."

56. *And they went to another village.*

That was the easiest thing for them to do and a great deal better than calling for fire from heaven upon anybody. If one village would not receive them, another would. And if you cannot get on with one person, get on with somebody else. Do not grow angry with people—that is not the way to make them better. To fight God's battles with the devil's weapons is generally, in the end, to fight the devil's battles on his behalf—let none of us make such a mistake as that.

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