

A LOST CHRIST FOUND NO. 2611

A SERMON
INTENDED FOR READING ON LORD'S-DAY, FEBRUARY 26, 1899.
DELIVERED BY C. H. SPURGEON,
AT NEW PARK STREET CHAPEL, SOUTHWARK,
ON A THURSDAY EVENING, EARLY IN THE YEAR 1857.

“But they, supposing Him to have been in the company, went a day’s journey; and they sought Him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance. And when they found Him not, they turned back again to Jerusalem, seeking Him. And it came to pass that after three days they found Him in the temple sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them and asking them questions.”
Luke 2:44-46.

WHAT a precious treasure must the child Jesus have been to His parents! You who have children whom you love, not merely because they are yours, but because you discover in them traits of character which are signs of divine grace, can tell in some measure how precious the child Jesus must have been. Born to His mother in a miraculous manner, her heart was set upon Him and after all the wonderful things that had been said about Him by the angel, by Simeon, and by Anna, you cannot wonder that she expected much, although she really expected less than she received. When you think of the perils and troubles to which His parents were exposed for His sake, by the sword of Herod, the flight into Egypt, and the cruelty of Archelaus, you cannot wonder that He was a very choice treasure to them, carefully tended, and well-guarded and protected. They had felt how terrible it would be to lose Him. They knew His worth—at least they guessed something of that inestimable value which must ever be attached to the perfect manhood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Do you not marvel, therefore, that they should have lost Him? It seems not a little amazing that they could have suffered Him to go away from them even for a minute. Trustworthy as He was, yet He must have been a child so dear to their hearts, His company must have been so precious to them that one would have thought His mother could scarcely have spared Him from her side for a single moment. You would hardly have imagined that in the midst of such a crowd as was assembled at Jerusalem she would have left Him alone for an instant. Surely, you would say, she would tend that precious treasure perpetually. If she took her child to places where she might lose Him, she would with the utmost care watch over Him until she brought Him back again. And yet Mary lost her Son—lost Him in Jerusalem—and even went a day’s journey before she discovered her loss.

Do not be astonished, O believer, do not be amazed at Mary losing her Son. You have a treasure quite as precious, for it is the same blessed Person! Jesus Christ is yours—not your Son, but your Brother—not your child, but your Friend. No, more—your Savior. Yours spiritually, yours by precious experience, yours by gracious donation of Himself to you, and yours by happy communings which He has held with you in many seasons of sweet refreshment. Yet some of you have lost Him—lost His company—but He has not lost you. His loving heart is still immutably the same towards you. You who have lost Him, as you think of your former joys, can join with deep emphasis in Cowper’s lines—

*“Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
Of Jesus and His Word?
What peaceful hours I then enjoyed.
How sweet their memory still!
But now I find an aching void
The world can never fill.”*

How is it you have lost Christ? One would have thought you would never have parted from Him. In such a wicked world as this, with Satan ever ready to rob you of Him, with ten thousand enemies trying to take Him away from you—with such a precious Savior whose presence is so sweet, whose words are so melodious, and whose company is so dear to you—one might have thought you would have watched Him every moment and never suffered Him to stray from you. But, alas! you have let Him go. Your Jesus has left you and you are seeking Him, and crying, “Oh, that I knew where I might find Him!” And

possibly, you went many a day's journey before you discovered that you had lost Him. You thought He was still in your soul, when really He had gone from you, and left you for a season, to let you find out your great need of Him that you might seek Him again with full purpose of heart.

To you, therefore, I address myself, for I think there is something in this narrative especially suitable for you. There is, first, *the loss of Christ*. Secondly, *the seeking after Christ*. And thirdly, *the finding of Christ*.

I. First, I have something to say concerning THE LOSS OF CHRIST. And I begin by saying that *souls, very dear and precious to the Redeemer, may yet lose the sensible enjoyment of His presence*. His mother lost Him, His father lost Him. They were very dear to Him and He was very dear to them, yet they lost Him. Many of the Lord's beloved people have lost their Savior. Not lost Him wholly—that can never be—their substance is in them, even when they have lost their leaves. The holy seed within them is the substance of their piety, but they have lost His visible presence and yet they are dear to Him, as when, by faith, with Simeon, they took Him in their arms and kissed Him with the lips of ardent affection. The best of saints sometimes have to endure the hiding of God's countenance and are made to walk through dark paths where they see not the shining of the sun. Shall I pause to give you instances? I might find you many such in God's Word, but instead, thereof, let me find them in your own hearts. Who among us, that has long known the Lord, has not had sometimes to mourn the absence of our Savior? Like the dove that has lost its mate, inconsolable until it has returned, we have been sitting alone and pouring out our moans and groans. We have sung, in plaintive tones—

*“Return, O holy Dove, return
Sweet messenger of rest!
I hate the sins that made You mourn,
And drove You from my breast.”*

We have cried to Him to come back, but He has hidden His face from us and covered Himself in the thick darkness, nor would He manifest Himself to us.

The first time that this great trouble surprises a true Christian, he usually draws this conclusion from it—“I am not the Lord's child or else I would always have the smile of His love.” It is a wrong conclusion. It is the logic of unbelief, it is a false logic, its conclusion is therefore untrue. A child does not always have its father's smile, though it is a fondly loved one, and is greatly delighted in—it is the offspring of its father's heart, very dear to him, sprung from his inmost soul as well as from his loins, yet it does not always have a smile, nor always a sweet word from him. There must be, sometimes, even in Christian families, sharp words from a wise parent's loving lips. It is not, therefore, a fair inference that Christ has left the soul on which He is not smiling. Oh! conclude not, you distressed one, you who have lost the evidence of grace and the comforting presence of your Master. Conclude not that He has shut up His heart of compassion when He has seemed to close His eyes of love. “I sleep, but My heart waketh,” says He. “I shut My eyes upon you, but My heart is loving you still. I lift the rod and scourge you, but my heart, in its inmost recesses, has still your name inscribed upon it. I will not leave you, I will not forsake you, I have not cast you away. I have chastened you sorely, but I have not given you over unto death. The clouds have not quenched the sun, you shall yet see the light. I will yet shine upon you and once more will I manifest Myself to you.” The losing of the conscious realization of Christ's presence, the suspension of communion with Him, is a very disagreeable and a very sad part of Christian experience, but let this be noted—it is often the experience of a true Christian and some of the very best and most highly favored of God's children have had to suffer it.

Now please notice *where the parents of Jesus lost Him*. They lost Him at the feast at Jerusalem and if ever you lose the company of your Master, O Christian, you will most likely lose it at a feast. I never lost my Master's company at a funeral—such a thing is more than possible at a wedding. I have never lost my Savior's presence in the house of mourning, by the bedside of the sick and dying, but I have sometimes felt suspension of fellowship with my Lord when the lute and the viol have been sounding in my ear, and when joy and gladness ruled the hour. Our most happy moments are our most perilous ones. It is said that where the most beautiful cacti grow—the most glorious of flowers—there are to be found the most venomous of snakes and truly, amongst our delights are to be found our dangers. As Cleopatra had an asp introduced to her in a basket of flowers, so have we many an asp brought to us in our joys. Take heed in the time of your joys, believer—you are safer in your season of sorrow.

Storms afford the safest sailing for a Christian, calms are for him more terrible than whirlwinds. Deep waters know no rocks, shallow waters that gaily ripple are the perils of the sea of our life. Far out upon the ocean, where the horizon has its round ring and nothing is within sight, the ship is seldom in danger, but near the shore, when the white cliff gladdens the eyes of the mariner, there the pilot must

look well to his helm. In your troubles, God is often especially with you, but He is not always with you in your joys. Job's sons learned that there were dangers in feasts—God's sons may not learn the same lesson in so terrible a manner, but they may learn it in a very grievous way. It would have been better for David to have been sick on his bed than to have been walking on his housetop enjoying the evening breeze. And it would be better for you to be cast into the fiery furnace of affliction, where you can be refined, than to be left to lie down in the meads of happiness, where you may have poison poured into your ear by a wily adversary. Beware of your joys! There is more fear of losing Christ at a feast than anywhere else. You are a young Christian and you are going out to a party this week—mind what you are at! I will not say to you—Do not go. If you can ask God's blessing in going, go. But I do say to you—Take care, take care. Mind, look sharp! Reef your sails when you get there. Go as fast as you like when you are alone, but mind what you are at when you are in the society of others. Take care, take care, take care, especially in mixed company!

And, ah! I am sorry to have to say—Take care, too, when you are in professedly Christian company, for what fine “Christian company” there is to be seen sometimes. Christians that cannot find amusement enough for themselves, cannot talk about the Lord Jesus, cannot mention His name, cannot find pleasure enough in the things of Scripture, but must turn to other and meaner things to supply them with joy. Take heed of all doubtful company—there is little good to be gained in some of your gatherings. If you cannot spend your time in prayer and in seeking what Jesus said and did, you had better be at home. Christ is often lost at a feast. His presence is often withdrawn from us when we get into company. Our Jesus loves seclusion. He will not strive, nor lift up His voice, nor cause it to be heard in the streets. He loves to dwell with His people in the privacy of the house. His message is, “Come, My people, enter into your chambers, and shut your door about you.” You will not lose your Master there. Have Him with you in your own household, you will not lose Him there. Walk with Him alone and you will not lose Him then. I do not say—Have no feasts—

*“Why should the children of a King
Go mourning all their days?”*

I will not say—Have no hours of gladness—you have a right to them. I will not say—Do not meet together—do so, your meeting may be profitable to each of you. But I do say—Take care what you are at. Christ Jesus was lost at a feast by His mother and He may be lost by you unless you are very careful.

To young persons who are seriously inclined, yet not decided for God, let me solemnly say that evil company is a snare of the devil. Oh, how many have been ruined by it! If Satan can but get you back to your old companions, he thinks it will be all right for him and that he will be sure to have you at last. Nothing will do for a man who has kept evil company but to leave it altogether. You cannot bear much of it—you had better give it up altogether—then you will be entirely safe. Or else there will be first one, and then another, enticing you a little way back, and then a little further back, until who can tell?—all those fair beginnings, as you thought them to be, may end by being blighted and destroyed by the blast of carnal, frothy conversation. The Lord deliver us from losing Jesus at a feast!

Observe, also, that Mary and Joseph lost Jesus for three days, from which I learn that *it is possible for a believer to lose the company of his Master for a long time, and yet find Him again after all*. They did find Him after the three days and you, too, poor mourning believer, will find God your Savior again. There is a poor doubter yonder. He is sick at heart, for he has lost his Lord and he cannot find Him. Oh, how he has groaned and poured out his heart before God, but still no answer has come to his cry. He concludes, therefore, that he must perish! No, poor desponding one, the parents of Jesus found Him the third day, so seek Him once more. His absence is but temporary. It may be long, but the longest hiding of His face shall have an end. O poor, timid child, cry not at the eclipse—though it may last an hour, the sun's light is not quenched! O you poor Little-Faith, you may well sigh, but do not despair! If Jesus has left you for a while, He will yet return to you, you shall again behold His face, again bask in the sunshine of His love, and know that He is yours and that you are His. If you have lost Him for months—yes, even for years, I had almost said, yet shall you find Him again. With your whole heart seek Him and He will be found of you—only give yourself up thoroughly to the search for Him and verily He will not leave you entirely, but you shall yet discover Him to your joy and gladness, and shall again be feasted with marrow and fatness. Three days was the child Jesus lost, but yet He was found again by Joseph and Mary! So Christ may be for a long time absent and yet may the poor saint find comfort in Him once more.

II. Now I come to notice THE SEEKING AFTER CHRIST. The father and mother of Jesus sought Him and those who have lost Christ's presence will do well to imitate their example.

Note, first, that *they sought Him very judiciously*, by which I mean that they sought Him in the right places. They went back to Jerusalem and sought Him. It was at Jerusalem they lost Him, so it was at Jerusalem that they might naturally expect to find Him. Tell me where you lost the company of Christ and I will tell you the most likely place for you to find Him again. Did you lose the company of Christ by forgetting prayer and becoming slack in your devotion? Have you lost Christ in the closet? Then you will find Him there. Did you lose Christ through some sin? Then you will find Him in no other way but by the giving up of the sin and seeking by the Holy Spirit to mortify the member in which the lust does dwell. Did you lose Christ by neglecting the Scriptures? Then you must find Christ in the Scriptures. Where you lost Him—you will find Him. It is a true saying, “Look for a thing where you dropped it, it is there.” So look for Christ where you lost Him, for He has not gone away. It is hard work to go back for Christ. John Bunyan tells us that the pilgrim found the piece of the road back to the arbor of ease—that journey back that he had to travel to find his roll under the settle—the hardest piece he had to go. Twenty miles on the road is easier to go than one mile back for the lost evidence. Take care, then, when you find your Master, to cling more closely to Him. But if you have lost Him, go back and seek Him where you lost Him.

And note, too, that *they sought Him among His kinsfolk and acquaintances*, and that is the right place for us also to find Him. If I am in distress of soul, where can I get relief? I saw a great placard as I came along just now, recommending persons who have the heartache to go to Charles Matthews to get it cured—I suppose, by seeing a play. Ah! they will go a long while, if it is real heartache, before they will get it taken away there. The theater is the place where they get the heartache, not where they lose it. People don’t lose diseases, generally, where they catch them. If you catch a fever anywhere, I would not advise you to go to the same house to get rid of it. If you have the heartache through indulging in some sin, it is not by deeper draughts of sin that you can cure it. Drinking may stupefy and intoxicate you for a while, and make you forget it, but it is a bad thing to use intoxicating liquor instead of the real remedy. O you that have the heartache, you that have broken hearts, you that have troubles rolling over your heads—where can you expect to find Christ? Why, among His kinsfolk and acquaintance! Do not go to the giddy haunts of vice and sin—go not where there is revelry and mirth, but go where the disciples of Jesus are known to meet. Talk with His people, converse with those who have the most knowledge of His love and of His power to save. It is most likely that you will find your Savior among His kinsfolk and acquaintance, but go not to the world to look for Him. Seek pearls where they lie deep down in the sea, but seek them not where such treasures never were discovered. Otherwise, you will go on a fool’s errand in verity and truth.

Mark again that while they sought Jesus judiciously, they sought Him continuously. They did not look for Him just one day and then give up the search, but they kept on looking until they found Him. So, Christian, if you have lost the precious joy of communion with your Lord, keep on seeking it and do not stop your prayers until you have recovered it. Be not content with one dive into the depths after this pearl, but dive again and again, with untiring perseverance, until you discover it.

And yet again, we are told that they sought Him sorrowfully. Mary said to Jesus, “Your father and I have sought You sorrowing.” I know this, no true believer will ever lose the company of His Lord without sorrowing over his loss. It would be impossible. I have heard some of you say that you have not had fellowship with Christ lately, but if you make that confession with a smile on your face, I have grave doubts about your piety. True Christians think it their greatest grief to lose their Master’s presence and they do not talk of it lightly. It is their misery that they have not the Prince of mercy with them. They want His company perpetually and if it is withdrawn, even for an instant, they feel that the light of the sun is taken away from their eyes—

***“‘Tis heaven to dwell in His embrace,
And nowhere else but there.”***

The parents of Jesus sought Him sorrowfully and we must do the same if we have lost Him. The best messengers to find Christ are the penitent tears of His saints. Tears act on divine mercy like the magnet on the needle—the tears of the Christian find out the heart of God. Go after your Master with wet eyes and He will soon come to you. There is a sacred connection between Christ and weeping eyes, for it is Christ’s office to wipe the mourner’s eyes, and whenever He sees you weeping, His fingers are eager to be wiping them. He must wipe them. He cannot bear to see the tears there and if He wipes them, He must come to you. So, the surest way to find Him is to seek Him sorrowing. There is nothing like a sorrowing prayer if we have lost our Lord. Prayers from a heart that is wrung with the rough hand of sorrow are the most acceptable in the ears of the God of Sabaoth. If you are sorrowing, O Christian, then

seek on and believe that you are all the nearer to finding your Lord when your sorrows increase! Tears are the bilge-water of the soul, the eyes are the pumps, and thus God keeps you floating till He brings you again into the haven of rest and peace. It is a blessed thing to be able to seek Christ, though it is sorrowfully.

III. Now I close by speaking concerning THE FINDING OF CHRIST. Mark, first, *where the lost Christ was found*. Do you know where His parents went to seek Him? When they went to Jerusalem, they asked all their kinsfolk and acquaintance, "Have you seen that dear lovely child?" All knew Him, but they answered, "No, we have not seen Him." I suppose they then went to the house of entertainment, the inn where they had stayed, and asked, "Is our Son here? Is our child here—that fair-haired boy, the most beautiful you ever saw?" "Ah!" the people would reply, "that is an old tale with women. Go away. We have not seen Him. He is not here." Christ was not in the inn. There was not room for Him there when He was born and there was not likely to be room for Him to remain there afterwards. They did not go to the palace to seek for Him—not inside it, at any rate. They were afraid of Herod, for if Herod had laid hold of Him, there would have been an end of Him. I daresay they thought that the dear child had been attracted by the splendid buildings that decked Jerusalem with glory, and that He would be sure to be in the crowd, gazing at some of the great and grand structures, so they went through the principal streets, thinking, surely, He would be there. And when they asked the curious people from foreign countries, who were investigating all the wonders of the city, if they had seen the child, they most likely stared them in the face, for Christ Jesus is not always to be found with the curious in their researches. There was a mountebank in the street and a number of children had gathered around him and the performance might be likely to attract Jesus, so His parents went there, but folly knew nothing about the holy child Jesus.

At last, His mother thought herself that, possibly, He might be in the temple. Yes, that was the place for Him! He was the King of the temple, and a King should be in his palace—and there they found Him, humbling the pride of the doctors. So learn from this, O Christian, that you will never find your Master where folly exhibits herself to gazing multitudes. You will never find Him where curious learning studies with deep research to discover everything that is wonderful and profound. You will never find Him where giddy mirth is gathered in the assemblies of the ungodly. But if you would find Christ, you must find Him in His temple, in the house of prayer! It is here that He makes His glories known. It is here that He speaks to His children. Here are set thrones of judgment, the thrones of the house of David—

*"The King Himself comes near,
And feasts His saints today.
Here we may sit and see Him here,
And love, and praise, and pray.
One day amidst the place
Where my dear God has been,
Is sweeter than ten thousand days
Of pleasurable sin."*

Sinner, if you seek Christ, seek Him where He is to be found. If you seek happiness, and peace, and mercy, go after Him where He goes. Lie down at the pool of Bethesda and if God has not yet quickened you, oh, that you might be brought to the pool of Siloam, to the gate of divine mercy, for it is here that Jesus Christ loves to resort and work the great wonders of His grace!

To the saints, I wish to say just this—Do not rest if you have lost the society of your Lord. Do not give sleep to your eyes, nor slumber to your eyelids until you have had restored to you the communion that has been suspended. Do not live, oh! I beseech you, do not live—live, did I say?—it is not living—do not continue to merely exist in such a condition for another hour. If your fellowship with Christ is broken, run to your house, fall upon your knees, and cry to Him to give you fresh manifestations of His love. It is dangerous to delay. O child of God, it is perilous to be without your Lord! This would be to make you like the sheep without its shepherd, a tree without water at its roots, a dried leaf in the tempest, not bound to the tree of life. Oh, may Christ influence your heart, that you may first see your danger and then, with full purpose of heart, seek after Him who is waiting to be found of you! I beseech you, by your desire for usefulness and happiness. I beseech you, by the loveliness of Christ, by the fearful condition of being found out of fellowship with Him. I beseech you, by your own sorrow, which you have already suffered, and by the misery which will certainly increase unless you find Him. I beseech you, rest not until you have found Christ again, to the joy and gladness of your spirit.

And as for those of you who know not the Savior, what I have been saying is as nothing to you—you are careless about these all-important matters, but I beseech you, by Him that lives and was dead, by the

solemnities of hell, by the dread mysteries of eternity, by the bliss of heaven, and by the terrors of the day of judgment. I beseech you as a dying man speaking to dying men, if you have never found Christ, let these words ring in your ears—you are without God, without Christ, without hope, and strangers from the commonwealth of Israel! Let me say those words again, though they are like the tolling of a knell—*Without God, without Christ, without hope, and strangers from the commonwealth of Israel!* Ponder over those two words, “*Without Christ! Without Christ!*” And if they do not stagger you, God help you! But if, my hearer, they do cause you to start, if God shall make them break you up, then, sinner, when He has broken you in pieces, remember that Christ Jesus is willing to save all those whom He has made willing to be saved. As certainly as you want Him, He wants you. Seek Him and you will find Him. Do but knock and the door of mercy shall be opened. Do but ask and you shall receive. O awakened sinner, here is Christ’s message to you. “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved.” Oh, that you would believe in Christ and be baptized! Oh, that God would help all of you who have nothing of your own, to give yourselves up to Christ and take Him to be your All-in-All! But hardened sinner, I send you away with those dreadful words which I repeated just now and I hope they will ring in your ears all the week—when you walk the streets, when you are on your bed, when you are at your meals—*without God, without Christ, without hope, and strangers to the commonwealth of Israel, and therefore, without heaven!* Those who have the earnest of heaven even now have a blessed “hope which makes not ashamed.” May that hope be given to you, my hearers, for Christ’s sake! Amen.

EXPOSITION BY C. H. SPURGEON:
ISAIAH 57:10-21 (NKJV) and 58:1-11.

The prophet has been giving a very terrible description of the sin of the nation. We need not read it all, but at last he says this—

Verse 10. *You are wearied in the greatness of your way.*

“You are worn out with your own way. You have been so zealous in your rebellion against God that you have actually fatigued yourself in the pursuit of evil.” That is a true description of those who have worn themselves out in the ways of sin.

10. *Yet said you not, There is no hope: you have found the life of your hand; therefore you were not grieved.*

Though they had hunted for pleasure and had not found it, and had brought themselves into great distress, yet they would not give up the hope of, after all, succeeding in their rebellion. Oh, how obstinately are men set upon seeking satisfaction where it can never be found—namely, in the pursuit of sin! These people were still alive and they were content to be so, but they were not grieved although God had sorely chastened them.

11. *And of whom have you been afraid or feared, that you have lied and have not remembered Me?*

“Me, your Maker, your Friend, to whom you must own your very soul, unless that soul shall go down into the pit, ‘You have not remembered Me.’”

11. *Nor laid it to your heart; have not I held My peace even of old, and you fear Me not?*

When God is very long-suffering and lets men alone in their sin, then, often, they quite forget Him and have no fear of Him.

12. *I will declare your righteousness, and your works; for they shall not profit you.*

If God once takes the self-righteous man’s righteousness and explains what it really is, He will soon reveal to its owner that it is a mere delusion and sham that will not profit him at all.

13. *When you cry, let your companies deliver you.*

“When sickness, depression of spirit and death itself, shall come to you, and you begin to dread what is to follow, and cry to those who comforted you in your time of health, what will they be able to do for you?”

13. *But the wind shall carry them all away; vanity shall take them: but he that puts his trust in Me shall possess the land, and shall inherit My holy mountain.*

All confidence in men shall be blown away as chaff is driven by the wind, but faith in God wins the day.

14, 15. *And shall say, Cast you up, cast you up, prepare the way, take up the stumbling block out of the way of My people. For thus says the high and lofty One that inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.*

That is a wonderful verse. You notice that the prelude to it explains the greatness and the holiness of God and then, like an eagle swooping out of the sky even down to the earth, we find God coming from His high and lofty place to dwell with humble and contrite hearts. Not with the proud—not with you who think yourselves good and excellent—does God dwell, but with men who feel their sin and own it. With men who feel their unworthiness and confess it. I will read this verse again to impress it upon your memory. “Thus says the high and lofty One that inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.”

16. *For I will not contend forever, neither will I be always angry: for the spirit should fail before me, and the souls which I have made.*

See the tender meaning of God’s message in this verse. He has been encouraging the guilty one and making him feel the enormity of his offenses and then He says, “I will not do that any more, lest I should crush him. He is too weak to bear any more punishment or reproof. Therefore I will not any longer afflict him, but I will turn to him in mercy, ‘for the spirit should fail before me, and the souls which I have made.’”

17. *For the iniquity of his covetousness was I angry, and smote him: I hid Me and was angry, and he went on backsliding in the way of his heart.*

Here God shows that His chastening does not always produce a good result, for, sometimes, when men are tried on account of sin, they grow worse and worse. “I hid Me and was angry, and he went on backsliding in the way of his heart.” What does God say of such a great sinner as that?

18. *I have seen his ways.*

“I have seen that he goes from bad to worse when I afflict him. Now I will try another plan. ‘I have seen his ways,’”

18, 19. *And will heal him: I will lead him also, and restore comforts unto him and to his mourners. I create the fruit of the lips; Peace, peace to him that is far off and to him that is near, says the LORD; and I will heal him.*

It is heart-melting to see the tenderness of God. “I will not further smite him, lest his spirit should fail before me. I will not continue to strike him because I can see that he only goes farther away from Me, the more I chastise him. I will deal with him in abounding love. ‘I will heal him.’” I believe that there is many a sinner who runs away from God thinking that the Lord is his enemy and as God pursues him, he does not dare look back. He thinks that it is the step of the Avenger that he hears, so he flies faster and farther away from God. But when he does venture to look back and sees that it is a loving Father’s face that is gazing upon him, oh, how he regrets his folly in running from Him! Then he throws himself into the arms of the God of love and wonders how he could have been the enemy of this, His greatest Friend. May such a happy turn as that happen to some whom I am now addressing!

20, 21. *But the wicked are like the troubled sea when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, says my God, to the wicked.*

They may have the semblance of peace, or a false peace, but nothing which is worthy of being called peace.

Isaiah 58:1, 2. *Cry aloud, spare not, lift up your voice like a trumpet and show My people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek Me daily.*

There are many nominally religious people who are full of sin. They have an external religion which allows them to live in rebellion against God. And such people are not easily convinced of sin. Hence the prophet is bid to lift up his voice like a trumpet. Yet, even if he does so, they will not hear him. There are none as deaf as those that will not hear—and these men do not wish to hear what God has to say to them “Yet they seek Me daily”

2. *And delight to know My ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of Me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God.*

They are always in a place of worship if possible. They cannot have too many services and sermons, yet they have no heart towards God. O my dear friends, let us always be afraid of merely external religiousness! Genuine conversion, real devotion to God, true communion with God—these are sure things—but mere outward religiousness is nothing but so much varnish and tinsel. It is indeed but the ghastly coffin of a soul that never was quickened unto spiritual life.

This is the way these sham religionists talked about their religion—

3. *Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and You see not? Wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and You take no knowledge?*

When God rejects a man's religion, what must be the reason of it? Here is the explanation.

3. *Behold, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, and exact all your labors.*

“You fast, but you make your workmen toil on still. You determine that they shall not have one atom of their labor abated and you make an amusement of what you call a fast. ‘In the day of your fast you find pleasure.’”

4. *Behold, you fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fiat of wickedness: you shall not fast as you do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high.*

The best sort of mere external religion will soon turn sour. If you do not worship the Lord in a right spirit, God will loathe the very form of your service. Why, you might, by hypocrisy, make even prayer meetings to be hateful in the sight of God, and the ordinances may be made as abominable to God as the mass itself. You can soon degrade hearing sermons into mere listening to oratory and the Sabbath-day may easily become an object only of superstitious and formal observance. The heart—the heart is everything. If that is wrong, it sours the sweetest things under heaven.

5. *Is it such a fast that I have chosen? A day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast and an acceptable day to the LORD?*

Does God care only for the externals of worship only? Is He satisfied with sackcloth and ashes, and the hanging down of the head like a bulrush?

6. *Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?*

Yes, this is true fasting before God—not to demand your pound of flesh and declare that you will have it. Not to grind down the poor man to the last farthing, but, “to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens and to let the oppressed go free.”

7. *Is it not to deal your bread to the hungry, and that you bring the poor that are cast out to your house? When you see the naked, that you cover him; and that you hide not yourself from your own flesh?*

That is the kind of fast that the Lord approves—to deny yourself that you may give to those who are in need.

8, 9. *Then shall your light break forth as the morning, and your health shall spring forth speedily: then your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your reward. Then shall you call and the LORD shall answer; you shall cry, and He shall say, Here I am. If you take away from the midst of you the yoke, the putting forth of the finger and speaking vanity.*

That is, if you shall take away all oppression, all wrong-doing to men, all talking of falsehood and speaking vanity, “Then shall your light break forth as the morning.”

10, 11. *And if you draw out your soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall your light rise in obscurity and your darkness be as the new day: and the LORD shall guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and make fat your bones: and you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.*

What promises God gives to those who consider the poor and needy round about them! But if you shut your ears to the cry of the distressed, God will shut His ears to your cry.

HYMNS FROM “OUR OWN HYMN BOOK”—709, 587, 242.

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