

Man's Misery and God's Mercy

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"Many times did he deliver them; but they provoked him with their counsel, and were brought low for their iniquity. Nevertheless he regarded their affliction, when he heard their cry: and he remembered for them his covenant, and repented according to the multitude of his mercies." Psalm 106:43, 44, 45

The children of Israel were, as you well know, a typical people, representative by their relationship to God, through a national and external covenant, of that chosen generation, that holy nation, that peculiar people, who stand in a nearer, higher, and more permanent relationship to him through that everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure, which is all their salvation, and, as made known to their heart by a divine power, is all their desire. (2 Sam. 23:5.) Now there were sundry reasons, and all of them stamped with the manifest impress of infinite wisdom, mercy, and grace on the part of God, why he chose a nation thus to be his peculiar people in external covenant.

1. *First*, it was that he might fulfil that gracious promise given immediately after the fall, whereby he pledged himself by his own word that the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head. It was necessary, therefore, that the Messiah, thus promised to come in the flesh to destroy the works of Satan, should spring from the seed of the woman; and that there should be a direct genealogical line preserved and put upon clear and positive record, so as to put it out of all doubt and question that he sprang lineally from Eve. This was secured by God's choosing and calling Abraham, whose

genealogy was clear and direct first from Seth, and secondly from Shem, and as such carefully preserved, and adopting the fruit of his loins as a separate and peculiar people. To him, therefore, God renewed in a more clear and positive manner the promise of the Messiah, by declaring that "in his seed should all the nations of the earth be blessed;" so that when Christ came according to the flesh, his lineal descent from Abraham could be clearly traced.

2. Another reason was, that God might have a people upon earth who should know his name, serve him acceptably, and worship him according to the rites of his own institution. When we look at the state of the heathen world, both in ancient and modern times, we see that but for this special provision all knowledge of God would have been lost out of the earth. The arts and sciences of civilised life might have attained, as in Greece, the greatest height; but sin and Satan would have reigned triumphantly in every place, and not a solitary soul been found to worship God in spirit and in truth. But by taking a people and communicating to them the true knowledge and worship of himself, God not only made himself known on earth by external revelation, but also raised up and maintained in their midst a spiritual seed to love, serve, and obey him.

3. Another reason was, that there might be an inspired revelation of his mind and will in a written record. There never was a time when the saints of God were without the spoken word, and by this, as proceeding out of the mouth of the Lord, they lived. (Deut. 8:3.) But there was no written word till the time of Moses. He is therefore said to have received the lively (that is, living,) oracles to give unto us. (Acts 7:38.) Among then the special privileges of Israel after the flesh was the being made trustees and depositaries of these written oracles, as the Apostle speaks: "What

advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God." (Rom. 3:1, 2.) And to this solemn and weighty trust they were faithful. Among all the sins of the Jewish people, this was not one, that they mutilated, corrupted, or depraved the word of God. Though a standing record against their innumerable crimes, and a faithful witness against their repeated and aggravated idolatries, they never destroyed, mutilated, or softened the accusing testimony, nor blotted out the threatenings and curses whilst they preserved the promises and blessings. If they disobeyed the law, they still revered it; if they afterwards made it of none effect by their traditions, they scrupulously preserved the letter of it in all its purity and integrity. Their faithfulness here has proved an unspeakable mercy to us who have succeeded to their inheritance. Through God's tender care over his own word, the grand charter remains uncorrupted, and we possess heaven's own title deeds undefaced, uninjured, neither shorn by violent hands, nor swollen by interpolating fingers.

4. Another reason was that God's dealings with them, and their dealings with God, might be upon permanent record, so that the Church in all ages might read as in a glass its own character as typified by the children of Israel, and the character of God as represented by his dealings with them. Now this is the reason why a Psalm like this, which gives us an epitome or brief history of the character and conduct of the children of Israel, both in the wilderness and in the promised land, as ever sinning and rebelling against God, and of his tender mercies toward them in spite of, and amidst all their sins and backslidings, is so instructing, edifying, and encouraging, that we see on the one hand, in their conduct, a representation of our own; and see on the other, in the dealings of God with them, a representation of

the merciful dealings of God with us. But as I hope, with God's help and blessing, to show these two points more completely in opening up the words before us, I shall now, without further preface, approach our text, in which I seem to see these four leading, prominent features:

I.—*First*, God's *numerous deliverances* of Israel: "Many times did he deliver him."

II.—*Secondly*, Israel's *base requitals*, and their sad consequence: "But they provoked him with their counsel, and were brought low for their iniquity."

III.—*Thirdly*, the *tender regard* with which God beheld them when in their affliction they cried unto him: "Nevertheless he regarded their affliction, when he heard their cry."

IV.—And *lastly*, God's *merciful remembrance* for them of his covenant, and the repentance that moved his gracious heart: "And he remembered for them his covenant, and repented according to the multitude of his mercies."

If you see and feel with me, you will see and feel great beauty and sweetness in the words of our text. I invite you, therefore, who belong to the spiritual Israel, you who know both what you have been and are towards God, and what he has been and is towards you, to listen this morning to a history of yourself, in which you will find abundant matter for shame and sorrow, and to a history also of the goodness and mercy of God, in which you will find abundant matter for praise and thanksgiving.

I.—I have first to show the *numerous deliverances* of the literal Israel as typical and figurative of the numerous deliverances of the spiritual Israel. "Many times did he

deliver them."

i. When we read the history of the children of Israel, as so fully and faithfully rendered in the Old Testament, how again and again do we find these words fulfilled. But out of these numerous deliverances, I can now only name a few.

1. Look first then at that great and signal deliverance, when they were bond slaves in Egypt, in seemingly hopeless and helpless servitude. Call to mind their groans and tears, their bruised backs and still more bruised hearts, when the cruel task-masters, at Pharaoh's command, set them to make bricks without straw, and yet exacted the same number as before. See with how fast and firm a hand the cruel Egyptian tyrant held them in that miserable country; how God sent plague after plague, and judgment after judgment upon him; and yet that wicked king hardened his heart and would not let them go. At length, when all other means failed, God sent forth the destroying Angel to smite the first-born, from the first-born of Pharaoh that sat on his throne unto the first-born of the captive in the dungeon, so that through Egypt there was a universal cry, for there was not a house where there was not one dead. Then, and not till then, did he send them out of the land in haste. But even then, no sooner had they buried their dead, than all God's judgments were forgotten. This implacable king was still determined to hold Israel. He pursued them with his chariots and his horses, and overtook them at the Red Sea. With the foaming waves before, and a ferocious foe behind, how completely did they seem cut off from all help or hope. Despair seized them, and they even quarrelled with their deliverer. "And they said unto Moses, Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? Wherefore hast thou dealt thus with us, to carry us forth out of Egypt?" (Exodus 14:11.) But how Moses stilled their troubled hearts. "And

Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will shew to you to-day: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to-day, ye shall see them again no more for ever. The Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace." (Exodus 14:13, 14.) In this their deep extremity, God spake the word; he bade Moses stretch forth his hand; the mighty waters parted on either side, and through the walls thus made, all the Israelites passed safely, men, women, and children, without suffering the least injury. But when their foes essayed the same, at God's command the waters returned and overwhelmed Pharaoh and all his armed host in the depth of the sea. What a deliverance was this.

2. See again how, when they came into the wilderness, God again and again stretched forth his hand to deliver them. He delivered them from famine by sending down manna daily for food. He delivered them from perishing by thirst by bidding Moses smite the rock, and the waters gushed out. Though he chastised them sorely for their sins, and though the carcasses of the rebels fell in the wilderness, yet he never failed to supply their needs. In that beautiful epitome of their history, which we find in the prayer of the Levites, Nehemiah 9, how truly and touchingly do they speak. "Yet thou in thy manifold mercies forsookest them not in the wilderness: the pillar of the cloud departed not from them by day, to lead them in the way; neither the pillar of fire by night, to shew them light, and the way wherein they should go. Thou gavest also thy good Spirit to instruct them, and withheldest not thy manna from their mouth, and gavest them water for their thirst." (Nehemiah 9:19, 20.)

3. If from the wilderness we follow them into the land of Canaan, we still see God's delivering mercies, as the same prayer acknowledges. "So the children went in and possessed the land, and thou subduedst before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gavest them into their hands, with their kings, and the people of the land, that they might do with them as they would. And they took strong cities, and a fat land, and possessed houses full of all goods, wells digged, vineyards, and oliveyards, and fruit trees in abundance: so they did eat, and became fat, and delighted themselves in thy great goodness." (Nehemiah 9:24, 25.) And how did they requite the Lord for all those mercies? "Nevertheless they were disobedient, and rebelled against thee, and cast thy law behind their backs, and slew thy prophets which testified against them to turn them to thee, and they wrought great provocation." (Nehemiah 9:26.) What then followed? Heavy judgments, repeated captivities, grievous oppression from their enemies. But did the Lord forsake them? No. When they cried unto him he heard their cry. "Nevertheless he regarded their affliction, when he heard their cry: And he remembered for them his covenant, and repented according to the multitude of his mercies." (Psalm 106:44, 45)

ii. Now can we not see in these dealings of God with Israel of old, thus recorded in the word, some similarity to God's dealings with his spiritual Israel now?

1. Was there not a time when, like Israel in Egypt, they were held in bondage by sin, Satan, and the world? Was not that then a great and wondrous deliverance, when by the power of his quickening grace he brought them out of their hard

bondage with a strong hand and outstretched arm? Was Pharaoh a worse enemy to the children of Israel than Satan was to them? Were Pharaoh's hard tasks harder tasks than sin set them to perform? Were the stripes inflicted upon the back of those who did not render the tale of bricks heavier than the stripes laid upon them by the scourge of a guilty conscience? And yet how the Lord was pleased to stretch forth his hand, and bring them out of the world and the bondage of sin, by a power which, if not as openly and evidently miraculous, was yet as real and as effectual.

2. Similarly when they came in soul experience to the Red Sea and feared there was no deliverance from the curse of the law, and the condemnation of a guilty conscience, Satan pressing upon them, like Pharaoh, from behind, and the anger of God against their sins meeting them like the waves of the sea in front, and there seemed to be no hope of escape, how the Lord opened a way even through those deep waters, and brought them safely through, so that they saw their enemies upon the sea shore. The cross of Christ is to these waters what the rod of Moses was to those of the Red Sea. They part asunder as it is stretched over them, and the redeemed pass safely through them; but the same waters, when they return to their strength, overwhelm their enemies.

3. But do we find no similar parallel also in the other deliverances which I have named as given of old to Israel? Has the manna from heaven, the smitten rock, the pillar of the cloud by day and of fire by night, and other wilderness mercies—have these continual deliverances from famine, from thirst, from being lost in a barren and trackless desert, no spiritual fulfilment? Taken even literally and providentially,

has there been no daily food given, no daily water, no daily raiment, no deliverance from time to time out of pressing trials in providence? As the children of Israel had to learn to live by providence, so have we. And where did they learn this lesson? Not in Egypt, where they sat by the flesh pots and ate bread to the full, but in the waste, howling wilderness. So it is with the family of God. The daily providence of God over them, his watchful eye, his loving heart, his bounteous hand, his tender care, are learnt—not in the world, but in the wilderness; not in wealthy Egypt, but in the barren desert.

But view it spiritually and experimentally, and see in wilderness sins and wilderness mercies, a reflex image of our behaviour to God, and of his dealing towards us. Out of how many trials, temptations, exercises, afflictions, how many seasons of bondage and captivity, brought upon ourselves by our own misdeeds, and wandering after our own idolatries, has he delivered us. Taking a review of all that we have been to him, and of what he has been to us, can we not set to our seal, "Many times hath he delivered us?"

Now it is these delivering mercies that endear God to the soul. Tracing his hand in this and that deliverance; seeing how, when none but he could help or deliver, the Lord appeared in this or that conspicuous instance, we learn or at least should learn to watch his hand and ascribe all the power and the glory to him. So Israel at the Red Sea saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea shore, and under the impression of that signal deliverance feared and believed. "And Israel saw that great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians: and the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord, and his servant Moses." (Exod. 14:31.) As the Psalmist

declares in the Psalm before us, faith was in their heart and praise in their mouth. "Then believed they his words; they sang his praise." (Ps. 106:12.)

Now what should we expect would be the fruit and consequence of those numerous deliverances? That for the future we should mistrust ourselves, and having seen, clearly seen, felt, deeply and painfully felt, the miserable consequences of taking counsel of the flesh, should take counsel of God. We have his word as our written guide; we have his Holy Spirit as our inward guide. Should we not then reverently and submissively take counsel of God's word; take counsel of his Holy Spirit how we should best glorify him, how walk most tenderly in his fear, how most render gratitude to him for his conspicuous deliverances in providence and in grace? Have we done so? Have we taken counsel with God's Spirit how to act? Have we made the book of God our daily companion? Have we sought direction from the sacred page, and have we requited God as we should have done for his various deliverances? Oh, how few can say that they have! How for the most part they must confess, to come to our second point,

II.—Their *base requitals* and the *sad fruits and consequences* of then. "They provoked him with their counsel, and were brought low for their iniquity."

I. Alas! Alas! Instead of taking counsel with the Spirit of God, how often we have taken counsel with our own spirit, and thus gone aside by being brought under a wrong influence. How often instead of taking counsel at the word of God and seeking direction from the sacred page, we have taken

counsel with friends who have misled us with false advice, or taken counsel with our own lusts to gratify them, or taken counsel with our own pride to indulge it, with our own ambition to feed it, with our own profit to promote it, or with our own comfort to enjoy it. Instead of taking counsel to please God, we have taken counsel to please self; instead of taking counsel from the word of God, we have rather sought to blunt its edge if too pointed, to neglect its warnings, disregard its precepts, overlook its cautions and admonitions, and pay no heed to its holy and wise instructions, and have rather listened to the pleadings of our own self-indulgent mind and the cravings of our restless, dissatisfied flesh. Such was Israel of old. "They waited not for his counsel;" or in the words of the text, "They provoked him with their counsel." Thus they committed two evils. They neglected God's counsel and they follow their own. They rejected the good and chose the bad. His kind and tender, suitable and salutary precepts and directions they despised; but all the promptings and inclinations, lusts, and devices of their own mind they eagerly and greedily followed. Now this must ever be the case when we slight the word of God. In religion there is no neutral position; no standing-place between good and evil, between obedience and disobedience; no nice balancing of motives and actions; no careful, cautious steering between the landmarks of right and wrong, as if we could just graze the edge of the shoal without touching it; no trimming between such a compliance with the will of God as shall please and satisfy him, and such a compliance with the will of the flesh as shall please and satisfy it. Saul tried this way; so did Ahithophel; so did Demas; with what success you know. To hold the gospel in the one hand and the world in the other; to please God and not displease man; to be religious

enough to get a name to live, and be carnal enough to secure a good share in the profits and pleasures, esteem and favours of the world—this is the grand feat of the day; and though men unhappily need no instruction either to devise or carry out a plan so specious and yet so suitable, Satan equips thousands of ministers to teach them more effectually to juggle with their own consciences and smooth the road down to the chambers of death. It is now as it was of old. The people love to be deceived, and the prophets love to deceive them. "Which say to the seers, see not; and to the prophets, prophesy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits." (Isa. 30:10.) "A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so: and what will ye do in the end thereof?" (Jer. 5:30, 31.)

But are we, who profess to be a people separated from all such doctrines and all such ways, clear in the matter? Have not we too much provoked God by our counsel? And is not this displeasing to God? A requiting his deliverance with base ingratitude? This is not what he expects at our hands; this is not that which is worthy of his great name, and of the obligations which he has laid upon us. And yet I believe there is not one amongst us who, were the matter pressed home to his conscience, would not be obliged to hang down his head and blush for shame with a confession before God that the charge is true. For the Lord regards the heart; his searching eye glances into our inmost bosom, and there he reads all our counsel. The plots, the schemes, the contrivances, the speculations that take place in the chambers of imagery, all lie naked and open unto the eyes of

him with whom we have to do. He sees how again and again we have consulted our own interest, comfort, and benefit, instead of the glory and honour of God; have sought to please ourselves instead of pleasing him, and to obtain something for our gratification, instead of aiming to know his will and do it. If we have sometimes had right thoughts, desires, and feelings, how they have faded away before they bore solid fruit; with what murmurings and fretfulness have we seen our idols taken away; and how grudgingly and unwillingly have we walked in a path of self-denial, and halted, looked back, or sat down at every little hill of difficulty or rough piece of road. Is not all this highly provoking to the Lord? If a father has heaped all possible benefits upon his son, given him the best of educations, liberally supplied all his wants, never denied him any one thing that was for his real good, nursed him in sickness, helped him in difficulty, discharged all his debts, and been to him the kindest and best of parents, would he not reasonably expect some return of gratitude and affection? But if instead of repaying his parents by affection and obedience, this son so carefully educated and tenderly indulged were to turn out a base character, and what is worse, were he to practice every manoeuvre to deceive his father, hide as far as he could all his misdeeds from him, put on an appearance of what is moral and good, and yet secretly was indulging in all manner of profligacy and vice, should not we cry shame upon such a son and such a course of conduct? Or if we had a friend whom we had loaded with benefits, to whom we had done all the good we could, and sought in every way to serve and oblige, and then found that he had been taking counsel how he might injure us, and was secretly plotting some design how he might more deeply wound us, how we should

lift up our hands and say, "O the ingratitude of man." Or if we had from time to time walked to the house of God in the company of one of whom we had hoped well, if we had confided to him some secret of our inmost bosom, and found, too late, that he was a traitor to God, truth, and friendship, we should wonder at man's iniquity and be surprised there could be any so vile. And yet all this is but a faint transcript, but a feeble copy of what we are internally, for I will not say that we have practised all this externally, before the eyes of a holy God. It is thus that we "provoke him with our counsel." The Lord has not allowed us, it may be, to put into active execution the various snares and contrivances of our wicked heart; has not suffered us to walk as we would have walked unchecked; has not permitted us to rear on solid ground our airy castles, or build and plant our visionary paradises. But the counsel was in the heart to do it, and this provoked him, though he would not suffer the plot to ripen into execution. Have you never plotted any secret lusts, and devised plans to carry them out? Have you never rolled and revelled in imagination in scenes of wickedness, and carried out a whole drama of sin, from the conception of a lust to its full execution? Have you never fed your lusts instead of starving them, and given way to a temptation instead of withstanding it? Have you not again and again speculated, contrived, and planned something that your conscience knew was evil and hateful to God?

And now with all that your conscience has registered, and all that your conscience has forgotten, can you look up to God, and say, "I have never provoked thee by my counsel; I have never had a thought in my heart, word in my lips, an action in my hands contrary to thy holy will? I have always

contrived that which was most for thy honour and glory, and never indulged in any plan or scheme to promote my own interest, gratify my own mind, or please my own flesh." O you hypocrite! O you poor deceived creature, thus too mock God and man. What a veil must be over your heart thus to hide from your sight both sin and self; for had you one right view of what sin was in the sight of holy God, you would have said, "It is of the Lord's mercy I was not consumed when plotting and taking counsel with my wicked heart, and sinning in speculation and imagination if not in positive action."

ii. But now let us see what the effect of this provoking God by their counsel was. They "were *brought low* for their iniquity."

God takes great notice of what goes on in men's hearts, and as he is provoked by their counsel, so in due time he brings them low; and that is "for their iniquity," for he is a God of knowledge, and by him not only actions but thoughts are weighed. "The thought of foolishness is sin." God has various ways of bringing down high looks. "The day of the Lord is to be upon every high tower, and the lofty cedars of Lebanon that are high and lifted up, and upon all the oaks of Bashan;" for "the lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day." (Isa. 2:11.)

But the Lord has various ways of executing this determination of his heart.

1. Sometimes he brings his people low in *circumstances*. You have been scheming and contriving how to get on in the

world; perhaps have succeeded in some measure, and your heart is lifted up. Now comes a stroke from God in providence, and you are brought low. Your work fails or your wages decrease; your business seems by degrees to dwindle and diminish; customers do not come as before into your shop; you lose good ones and get bad ones; an opposition establishment is set up near you, and you have the mortification of seeing your trade leaving you for your rival; or you make bad debts; bills come in that you can scarcely meet, and difficulties arise from quarters you could scarcely have expected. Or your farm becomes unprofitable; you have great losses among your sheep or cattle; or blight upon your crops; or something in a way of marked adversity which seems pointedly to show the hand of God against you. Or if you are not in business, through a bank failure, or railway reverses, or lending money which the borrower has speculated with and cannot repay, you scarcely know whether you will be able to act the honourable man, or be brought through with the respect and credit you have always maintained through life. These heavy strokes make you examine why you are thus dealt with, and you soon begin to see that you are brought low for your iniquity; that pride, or covetousness, or worldly mindedness has mastered you, that you have been taking counsel with sin and self instead of with the Lord, and that this wrong conduct has brought this stroke upon you.

2. Some God brings low in *body*, lays upon them a complaint which may make life miserable without much shortening it, such as a nervous affection, or a low and melancholy state of mind, springing out of and connected with some bodily affliction, so that life itself may still endure, yet day after day

brings with it gloom and misery.

3. Sometimes the Lord sends a blight upon the *family*. How often godly parents, sometimes even ministers of truth, have disobedient, ungodly children, whose conduct not only by contrast, but really and actually exceeds the wicked life and actions of those who have never known the restraints of a religious home, have never heard a godly father's prayers, or a gracious mother's admonitions. One would think that this was enough to bring the parents low both before God and man, and to ask themselves, "Is there not a cause? If thus afflicted in my family, have not I been guilty of some neglect, and in some measure brought this trouble upon myself by my undue severity or my undue indulgence?"

Or you may have suffered from painful family bereavements—may have lost a dear wife or beloved husband, an excellent son or an affectionate daughter, and your pleasant plants have been laid waste.

4. Others again the Lord brings low more especially as regards their *souls*. He permits them to be much exercised with doubts and fears, allows Satan to fall upon them with his suggestions, suffers them to be tempted day by day, and night by night; and by these severe and cutting temptations they are brought down so low as sometimes or even often to question whether they have a spark of grace in their hearts, or a grain of godly fear in their souls. In these and similar ways the people of God are often brought very low.

But now observe the effect of these dealings of God with them. Their eyes become opened to see the hand of God in these dispensations of his providence or his grace. They are

made to feel that they are brought low for their iniquities; that there was some secret sin indulged, some ungodly counsel followed, some base requital of the kindness and mercy of God; and they can see, if brought low, they have brought it upon themselves. "Hast thou not procured this to thyself?" They can see that they were cumbered with much serving; had got into a worldly spirit; had been drawn aside from the strait and narrow path; had become languid and careless in the ways of the Lord; had lost much of their former love, zeal, and tenderness of conscience, and had fallen into a dead and barren state. Now they plainly see why they are brought low and find the word to be true, "He that soweth to the flesh, shall of the flesh reap corruption."

But shall they be left there? No; they have a merciful God to deal with. They have not a hard taskmaster over them like Pharaoh; they have not a cruel enemy like Satan: but have a merciful God, whose compassions fail not. We therefore read, which brings us to our next point;

III.—"Nevertheless"—O what a "Nevertheless!"—"He *regarded their affliction* when he heard their cry."

Here is the mark of the life of God in the soul; for when the Lord's people are brought low for their iniquity, there is usually a sigh and a cry after God put into their heart; and as this sigh and cry is sincere, and they are not like those of whom we read, "They have not cried unto me with their heart when they howled upon their beds;" as it is the special fruit of God's grace, and is the Spirit's interceding breath in them, he bows down his gracious ear and regards the voice of their supplication. And though they cannot pray fluently,

for their fluent prayers in times past are now turned into sighs and groans; though they cannot approach the Lord with any measure of confidence and sweet assurance, as having so basely sinned against him, yet there is this wrought by his Spirit and grace within them, that they cry out of the depths of a broken heart and contrite spirit. Nay, they are sometimes obliged to go back to their first prayer, and cry, "God be merciful to me a sinner." They are made to confess their sins, and to mourn over them; they are made to lament and grieve that ever they have taken counsel with the flesh, and requited the Lord so basely for his former deliverances. No spot is too low for them, no posture too humble, no confessions too abject and unreserved. They confess themselves to be the chief of sinners, the very vilest and worst of all transgressors, the basest and blackest of all backsliders, the most daring of all rebels, and the filthiest and guiltiest of all trespassers on the long-suffering and mercy of God.

Now, when they thus cry, their prayers enter the ears of the Lord of sabaoth. He regards their affliction. One of the most painful things you often feel is this, that the Lord regards not your afflictions. You that are afflicted—afflicted in circumstances, afflicted in body, afflicted in family, afflicted in mind,—how often you feel or fear that God does not regard your affliction. You say, "If God regarded my affliction, would he not remove it or support me more under it? If he regarded my affliction, why does he not stretch forth his hand and alleviate it, if not utterly take it away? But instead of that, he adds grief to my sorrow, and rather makes the load heavier than lighter. Why does he thus add cross to cross and blow to blow? Or if he see fit still thus to

afflict me, why have I not more faith, more patience, more submission, more power to bear what the Lord lays upon me, and why do I not reap more profit from it? Where is my humility? Where my submission to the will of God? Where my thankfulness even for the smallest of his mercies? Where my sense of his vast goodness to me, in spite of, in the midst of my many troubles? It all seems swallowed up in my affliction. I am so troubled that I cannot speak; my afflictions are so heavy they seem to crush me down." But, notwithstanding all these murmurs and anxious inquiries, the Lord regards your affliction. He did not bring this stroke upon you without intending it for your good. Why has he brought you down in circumstances, why has he afflicted you in body, tried you in mind, and brought you low in spirit, but because he meant to bring good to you out of it? And has not good already come out of it? Has it not broken to pieces the counsel you took with self, and made you fear lest you should be entangled once more in besetting sins? Has it not made you dread lest you be again caught in Satan's snares; made you see more of the holiness of God, his purity and majesty, and the dreadful evil of sin; made your conscience more tender, caused the fear of God more to grow and thrive, humbled you, and laid you low in the dust before him? Is there no good here? A Christian, as he grows in grace, like ripe corn, will bend down to the ground. He will not lift up his stalk as when the ear is first shooting forth; but like the ripening ear, will more and more bend down his head. He cannot get too low; and the more grace he has the lower he will get, for the richer the ear and the riper the corn, the more it droops its head. Barren professors lift themselves up on high. No stalks grow so high as barren stalks; no ears look so proudly as those that have all chaff in them and no corn. Winds and rain

lay heavy crops; you never see laid wheat when the crop is light. So if you feel or fear that God does not regard your affliction, yet if your affliction has humbled you, brought you down, made you prize mercy more, shown you more of the evil of sin, made your conscience more tender, brought you more out of the world, and more into union with God's dear family, it has done you good. There was a purpose in it, and that purpose has been thus far already accomplished.

"Nevertheless he regarded their affliction, when he heard their cry." It is, I was going to say, insulting to the Majesty of heaven, to say that God does not regard your affliction. It is denying his all seeing eye, or his almighty hand, or his tender, merciful heart. He *does* regard your affliction when he hears your cry.

But how does he show this. Has he no means of displaying his mighty hand and stretched out arm? Is he ever silent? No!

IV.—Observe then fourthly God's remembrance of his covenant and repentance toward his children. "And he *remembered* for them his covenant, and *repented* according to the multitude of his mercies."

God made a covenant with Israel. He swore unto Abraham that in him and in his seed all the nations of the earth should be blessed. And God having bound himself by oath and covenant, it was incumbent upon his veracity and faithfulness never to depart one jot or tittle from it.

i. But there is something exceedingly striking in the words, "He *remembered* for them his covenant." It is almost as

though God had partially forgotten it, or rather as though he was almost tempted to break it. I have thought sometimes that if God had not bound himself by covenant, the sins and iniquities of his people are so great that he would have been provoked beyond all endurance, to cast them off for ever and send them headlong to perdition. Therefore, if I may use the expression, he tied his own hands by the bond of his own veracity. He bound himself by a covenant that he might not be provoked beyond endurance; so that when his arm was about to be let loose to sweep them from the earth, his covenant held him back. We see this represented in the Psalm before us. "Therefore he said that he would destroy them, had not Moses his chosen stood before him in the breach, to turn away his wrath, lest he should destroy them." But how did Moses stand before him in the breach? By reminding him of his covenant, as well as telling him what the Egyptians would say if he destroyed his people in the wilderness. "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou swarest by thine own self, and saidest unto them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give unto your seed, and they shall inherit it for ever." (Exodus 32:13.) And what was the effect of this plea? "And the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people." (Exodus 32:14.) It was in this way that Moses, as the typical mediator, stood between God and Israel and held back his outstretched hand. God remembered for them his covenant.

But now let us view this point in a New Testament sense as bearing upon the covenant of grace. God made a covenant with his dear Son on behalf of his chosen people. In this covenant he engaged to pardon all their sins; to clothe them

with a robe of righteousness in which they should stand accepted and justified; to bless them with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ Jesus; to carry them through all the storms of life, and set them before his face in glory. The Son undertook to save all those given to him, to wash them in the fountain of his own most precious blood, to live, die, and rise again for them, and so fully and faithfully to execute the trust committed to him, that, as their Surety and Mediator, he might stand up at the last day, and say, "Of them which thou gavest me, I have lost none."

Now if God had been provoked by the sins of any one of his people to let loose his hand and sweep him into destruction, he would have broken his covenant. He covenanted to accept and bless every member of the mystical body of Christ, so that if one were lost the whole covenant would have been broken. It is with this heavenly as it is with earthly covenants. Take, for instance, a lease or a contract. If you break any of its conditions, the whole is made void. So if any one of God's dear family should perish by the way, the covenant of grace would have been broken. Therefore, "He remembers for them his covenant." Though he hates their sins and brings them low for their iniquities; though grievously provoked by their disobedience, yet he remembers for them—that is, upon their behalf—his covenant. It is not their good deeds he regards, nor their bad. He looks higher than either. He looks at his dear Son, with whom he has made an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure. He looks at the seal whereby it was sealed with blood, for we read of "the blood of the everlasting covenant," and as in Egypt, he remembers the blood, and passes by their sins, as he passed over the houses of blood-besprinkled Israel.

O the blessedness of having a manifest interest in the blood of the covenant, and thus to have a testimony that God has made a covenant with his dear Son upon our behalf; that our names are written in the book of life; and that Christ is our Mediator at the right hand of the Father. What are all earthly blessings compared with this? What are health and strength and riches and all the goods of life; what is everything that the carnal heart can desire or the covetous mind grasp; what is all compared with an interest in the everlasting covenant, and in the love and blood and righteousness of the Lord the Lamb? What is earth, with all its attractions, compared with an interest in the precious, precious blood of a dying Jesus? You will find it so when you come to lie upon a bed of languishing and pain; when the cold drops of sweat stand upon your forehead, and the last enemy is about to grasp you by the throat. What will your anxious strivings to have something and be something more than you have or are—aye, I may add, your successes,—what will they do for you then? Only be so many ghastly spectres of the past to terrify and alarm your conscience, to see what shadows you have been seeking to grasp to the neglect of solid substance. But in that solemn hour to have a testimony from God of pardon and peace, will make smooth a dying bed; will calm all anxious fears; and will take you safe through the dark valley of the shadow of death.

ii. But now for a few words on the last clause of the text: "He *repented according to the multitude* of his mercies." It was, as I have said just now, as if God were about to make an end of them. But see how this bears upon our daily experience. Sometimes when you have been plotting and contriving, and

perhaps spent half the day in scheming how you shall accomplish this or that worldly design, at night you begin to reflect on the business of the day; and the plots and schemes which have passed through your busy mind fall with some weight and power on your conscience. And now you wonder how God could bear with you; how he could suffer a wretch like you to live and indulge such schemes and plans for your own honour, gain, or ambition, and consult so little the honour and glory of God. Now you are led to see that the Lord would, if he gave full scope to his anger, make an end of you; but instead of that he repents—that is to say, he will not do that which he would otherwise do. Not that we are to ascribe repentance to God as we should to man. But as a term borrowed from the language of men, he so far repents as not to put into execution the thoughts of his holy, indignant heart. Thus instead of sweeping us into destruction, he draws us to his bosom; instead of judgment he manifests mercy; instead of wrath he reveals his grace; and thus he repents according to the multitude of his mercies. What a sweet expression it is, and how it seems to convey to our mind that God's mercies do not fall drop by drop, but are as innumerable as the sand upon the sea-shore, as the stars that stud the midnight sky, as the drops of rain that fill the clouds before they discharge their copious showers upon the earth. It is the multitude of his mercies that makes him so merciful a God. He does not repent according to a drop or two of mercy: that would soon be exhaled and gone, like the rain which fell this morning under the hot sun. But his mercies flow like a river, yea, like that "river of God" which we read "is full of water." There is in him a multitude of mercies for a multitude of sins and a multitude of sinners. And thus he repents according to the multitude of

his mercies.

This felt and received in the love of it breaks, humbles, softens, and melts a sensible sinner's heart; and he says, "What, sin against such mercies? What, when the Lord has remembered me in my low estate, again visited me with the light of his countenance, and manifested once more a sense of his mercy,—what, shall I go on to provoke him again, take counsel of my own heart again, walk inconsistently again, be entangled in Satan's snares again? O, forbid it God, forbid it gospel, forbid it tender conscience, forbid it every constraint of dying love!"

Thus God takes occasion, by the very necessities of his people, to melt them into obedience, to soften them into contrition, to dissolve them into repentance, and thus to bring a crop of praise and gratitude out of the furrows which he waters so abundantly with his mercy. He thus reaps to himself a revenue of eternal praise in heaven, whilst he secures that obedience whereby he is glorified even now upon earth.