

The Fool: His Character, Affliction, and Deliverance

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"Fools, because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, are afflicted. Their soul abhorreth all manner of meat; and they draw near unto the gates of death. Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and he saveth them out of their distresses. He sent his word, and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions." Psalm 107:17-20

The dealings of God with the souls of his people are similar, yet diversified; similar in substance, diversified in particulars. "All thy children shall be taught of the Lord;" "When he is come, he shall convince the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment;" "This is life eternal, that they may know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent;" "He shall take of mine, and shall show it unto you." These, and many other texts of a similar kind, point to the uniformity of God's teachings and dealings with the soul. And yet, if we were to converse with God's people, one by one, we should find, that though in many points there was in their experience a great similarity, yet in others there would be a great diversity. The Apostle Paul, speaking of the gifts of the blessed Spirit (and in these gifts we may include also his graces) mentions this similarity and diversity. "Now, there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord; and there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God who worketh all in all." Again: "But all these worketh that one and the same Spirit (*similarity*), dividing to every man severally as he will" (*diversity*). (1 Cor. 12:4-6, 11.)

Psalm 107 is an epitome of Christian experience; an abstract,

as it were, of the gracious dealings of God with the soul. And did time and opportunity permit us to run through the leading points of that Psalm, we should find these two features stamped upon it—*diversity* of experience in each case; with *similarity* in four things—distress, cry, deliverance, praise.

In this epitome of Christian experience, Psalm 107, four characters stand prominently forth, which we may thus briefly characterise—the *Wanderer*, the *Rebel*, the *Fool*, and the *Mariner*.

I shall with God's blessing this morning, take up the character of the "fool;" and, in looking at his experience as drawn by the pen of inspiration, I shall hope to consider,

I.—*First*, his *character*.

II.—*Secondly*, his *affliction*, with its *cause* and *consequences*.

III.—*Thirdly*, his *cry*.

IV.—*Fourthly*, his *deliverance*.

I.—We are forbidden to call one another "fools," but there is no Scripture against calling ourselves "fools." If I am not mistaken, there are those here (at least I know one) who have called themselves fools, and the worst of fools, a thousand times over, and sometimes many times a day. If, then, we have called ourselves "fools," you will not be offended if the blessed Spirit call you the same. It is only bearing his witness to what you have often borne against yourself.

"*Fools*," says our text, "*because of their transgressions, and*

because of their iniquities, are afflicted."

What is a "fool?" naturally, I mean. He is one who has not the least regard for his own interest, whom everybody can gull and deceive; who will barter gold and silver for sticks and stones; whom his best friends cannot manage, and whom his enemies can securely deride and ridicule. Such is a fool. And as there are fools naturally, so there are fools spiritually; and I may justly say, far greater fools spiritually, than the greatest fool that ever lived naturally.

But let us see, by a little closer examination, how far this portrait corresponds to what many a child of God feels himself to have been or to be.

Now you would not think that if the Lord had quickened a man's soul into spiritual life, planted his fear in the heart, and made him sensible of the nature of sin, and given him repentance and godly sorrow for it; taught him to feel how dreadful and detestable all evil is; brought him to the feet of Christ: revealed to him the love of the Saviour, and manifested a sense of mercy and goodness to his soul; you would not think that after the Lord had done thus much for him, he could ever trifle with, or in any way indulge or caress this monster, sin, which had been shewn to him in so hideous a light. And yet this is what this fool does. He can trifle in his imagination with sin, though he has seen what a detestable thing it is; he can, in his wickedness, indulge that evil which caused the dear Lamb of God such acute sorrow, and has at times caused his own soul sorrow also.

Again. Is not God our only Friend? Where shall we find such another? If he be our Friend, need we care for any foe? If he be our foe, of what value is any friend? But if you had a friend who had been heaping benefit after benefit upon you, and you should do everything to offend, to grieve, to

distress, to pour contempt upon him, and if possible to alienate all his regard and affection from you, would not this be the height of folly? Yet who can say he is not guilty of this folly before God? Who can say he has not thus provoked his best, his only Friend, that Friend without whose friendship all is misery, and wretchedness, and woe? Who dare say that he has not grieved, offended, slighted, and neglected this Friend that sticketh closer than a brother? And for what? for what? For some vain gratification; for some foolish lust; for some base desire; for something which is not worth having when we have got it; for something from which our eyes should be turned away rather than looked upon; for something evil which ought to be detested and abhorred. And yet, who that knows himself, the workings of sin in his fallen nature, and what a depraved imagination can do—who is not sensible that all this he has done, and perhaps is doing, daily? "Hast thou not procured this to thyself?" says the Lord to his sinning Israel. Who dares say he has not by his sins; his carnality, pride, covetousness, worldly-mindedness, unbelief, foolishness, and rebelliousness, procured to himself many things that have grieved and distressed his soul? I do not believe that there is one child of God exempt who knows himself. If indeed we take no notice of the sin that dwelleth in us; if we pass all by as a thing of nought, and pay no regard to our thoughts, desires, words, and actions; if we keep evil at arm's length, and take our stand on our own righteousness and holiness, we may refuse to believe that we are such vile sinners. But if we are compelled to look within, and painfully feel that sin is an indweller, a lodger, whom we are obliged to harbour; a serpent that will creep in and nestle whether we will or not; a thief that will break through and steal, and whom no bolt nor bar can keep out; a traitor in the garrison who will work by force or fraud, and against whom no resolution of ours has any avail; if such be our inward experience and conviction, I believe there is not a man or

woman here who will not confess "guilty, guilty; unclean, unclean!" 'Lord I am that fool!'

II.—I pass on to the *affliction* of the "fool." Does the Lord pass him by, and let him go on unchecked in his foolishness? "Folly," we read, "is bound in the heart of a child, but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him." (Prov. 22:15.)

i. The cause of affliction is *sin*. "Fools," we read, "*because of their transgressions, and because of their iniquities are afflicted.*" The Lord does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men. We bring affliction upon ourselves; we procure suffering by our own transgressions, and by our own iniquities. But you will say, perhaps, these are very strong words,—*"transgression and iniquities."* I grant their strength, but they are not one whit, according to my feelings, too strong. Must not the Psalmist, you will perhaps say, be speaking here of some very black and base transgressors, some out-of-the-way characters? Surely he was not fixing his eye upon any whose lives were consistent. He must have been dipping his brush into very black colours in order to depict some enormous backsliders. If the Lord should ever take the veil of unbelief and self-deception off your heart, and give you one little peep, one transient glimpse into the chambers of imagery, you will not find these words too strong. It is from want of seeing what sin is, feeling its burden, knowing its guilt, and sorrowing under its smart, that men think only this, or the other outward thing is *"transgression"* or *"iniquity."* Thoughts, looks, words, desires, imaginations—are not all these evil? Are not these sinful? Are not these in the sight of God *"transgressions and iniquities?"* They are. The Lord tells us, "He that looketh upon a woman to lust after her hath already committed adultery with her in his heart." "The thought of foolishness is sin." Iniquities and transgressions are inward as well as outward. I know not

your personal sins; but there is One in heaven that knows them wholly, and one on earth, his vicegerent in the heart, that knows them partially. Let only that witness speak, let only conscience open the pages of that long and black catalogue, let sin be seen and felt as sin, and I believe you will confess there are many "transgressions," many "iniquities;" more or less daily, daily transgressions, hourly, hourly iniquities, transacting in the chambers of imagery. Now in order to shew us these, the Lord has to afflict us. It is usually in the furnace of affliction that we come to see the depths of the fall, to learn the nature of sin, and to have some discovery of ourselves as sinners. Give a man health, strength, good spirits, and abundance of worldly prosperity, what a thick evil soon covers his heart! Sin is not seen as sin; carnality and self-indulgence are drunk down like water; one folly after another is played with, each opening a way for the next, and binding on a fresh cord, till the yoke of transgressions is wreathed round the neck. Now what is to be done with this "fool?" Is he to be given up? No. "How shall I give thee up Ephraim?" But he must be corrected in measure, and not left altogether unpunished. Hence the furnace.

When, then, the Lord puts the soul into the furnace of affliction, things before hidden, passed over in the whirl of business or the flurry of carnality, are discovered. Conscience first brings to light one sin, and then another, till the sum appears innumerable and the prospect indeed is dark and gloomy. For with the affliction comes a sense of God's displeasure; and the poor fool reflects with sadness and remorse on his folly in bartering a sense of God's approbation for something that has perished in the using.

ii. But the *consequence* is twofold. 1. *"Their soul abhorreth all manner of meat;"* 2. *"they draw near unto the gates of*

death."

1. "All manner of meat" their soul abhorreth. What meat is this? Not merely meat *naturally*, but also meat *spiritually*; not only the food of the carnal mind, but the food of the spiritual mind—the things of the spirit, as well as of the flesh. The "fool" until he is afflicted and humbled, has gone out in desire after many foolish and hurtful lusts; has indulged in many things that would be hated and shunned under some trouble, or under warm impressions of grace; and whilst in this foolish course could eat "all manner of meat." His natural meals were eaten with relish, through health and strength; and the carnal mind, not being held in due check, nor crucified, as it should have been, and denied, could and did much feed upon trash. But let the Lord afflict him, and put him in the furnace, and there begin to take away the dross, he begins to abhor "all manner of meat." Nothing satisfies him now. How pleased he was with his business; how his thoughts settled down on the shop or farm; his speculative mind could run in to various imaginary channels of advantage. Trade was to be increased in this direction, or profit gained in the other; and whatever check conscience might interpose, there was a secret power that overbore the opposition. But let the Lord afflict him in body or mind, and bring his soul down into trouble, what then is "all manner of meat?" His shop is now a burden; his business a trouble; his farm or his employment only wearisome work. "All manner of meat," which his carnal mind at one time so greedily fed upon, he now learns to abhor. There is no gratification to be found in anything. A dark pall of gloom and melancholy is drawn over the world. The things of time and sense fade out of his sight; and he sees that vanity and vexation of spirit, misery and sorrow are stamped upon all earthly pursuits.

But not only does he abhor "all manner of meat" in a *natural*

sense, but even he abhorreth "all manner of meat" in a *spiritual* sense; that is, his soul's disease makes him turn away from the very food that is its only remedy. Do you always love religion? Do you always delight in your Bible? Do you always come with eagerness to the throne of grace? Do you always love secret meditation and Christian conversation? And do you always relish spiritual-mindedness, and to have your affections placed on things above? Come, be honest with yourselves. No disinclination ever for the word of God? No unwillingness ever to hear the word of truth? No idle excuse made on account of the weather or the fatigue of business? No excuse not to go to a throne of grace? No disinclination to take up the cross? No aversion to the company of the spiritually-minded? No dislike to the solemn realities of the things of God? What? Is the enmity of your carnal mind all covered up? Is the veil of self-deception so drawn over what you are as a fallen sinner that it never peeps forth? O, if you know yourselves, you will be convinced that the carnal mind is and ever will be enmity against God, and that the carnal mind manifests its enmity by its disinclination to spiritual things.

Here, then, is the "fool." When he is struck, as it were, with soul sickness, has to reap the bitter reward of his folly, and has to mourn over what he has been and is, and the state of things he has brought himself into, he not only abhors "all manner of meat" naturally, but he finds his soul sunk into such carnality and death that it abhors all manner of spiritual meat; that he has not that delight in the word of God, nor that inclination to a throne of grace, nor that love after spiritual things, nor that relish in heavenly employments which he had in times past when the candle of the Lord shone upon him, and by his light he walked through darkness.

2. The next consequence is, that he "*draws near unto the gates of death.*" This seems to be the worst symptom of his malady. There has been a time perhaps when the Lord afflicted him in body, or in circumstances, or in family, and it was borne with resignation and calmness, for the sweet consolations of the Lord comforted his soul and upheld his spirit. But O to be afflicted in various ways, and then not to have the presence of the Lord; not to enjoy the sweet consolations of his Spirit; not to have an appetite for the Word of God; not to feed upon heavenly meat; not to drink in the milk of the promises; not to love a throne of grace; and not to feel a sweet union with the people of God—to be afflicted in body, soul, or circumstances, and yet to have the mind still carnal unto death—this it is that most deeply aggravates the affliction. The affliction in itself is hard to bear; but the denial of the Lord's presence and a sense of his displeasure makes it a thousand times worse; and when to all this is added, "All these things have I procured to myself;" this makes the knife cut deep. It is almost as if conscience laid hold of the haft when in the hand of God, and drove it in up to the hilt. 'My worldly-mindedness, my pride, my covetousness, my carnality, my neglect of divine things, my rebelliousness, and recklessness, the snares I have been entangled in, and my various besetments'—'O,' says the fool, 'this it is which has provoked the Lord to afflict me sore; and to make the affliction yet heavier, to withdraw his presence, and leave me, fool that I am, to reap the fruit of my own devises!'

Thus he draws near to the gates of death in his feelings spiritually, and, it may be, from an afflicted body naturally. As death seems to approach, he is almost overwhelmed with gloomy fears, yet knows not how to escape from the burdens and weights which so heavily oppress him.

Here, then, he is, as low as a poor soul can well be—in a pitiable plight, in a very sad and miserable condition. He can now say with Hart, and he never penned a truer verse:—

"O what a fool have I been made,
Or rather made myself!
That mariner's mad part I play'd
Who sees, yet strikes the shelf."

III.—Well, is it all over? Is there no hope? Is all remedy gone? Must he sink away into despair and die? Shall Satan, with a yell of triumph, flourish his bleeding sword over the slaughtered victim? He would, he must, if God were not rich in grace, and abundant in mercy and goodness. We therefore find, that the Lord does not leave him in this pitiable case and miserable condition, but raises up and draws forth *a cry* in his soul. This is a blessed evidence of the life of God within, which all his folly could not utterly extinguish, and which all the miserable condition in which he is cannot wholly drown.

"Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble." A cry in the still depths of the soul! The blessed Spirit touches his heart with sacred grief and holy compunction; dissolves the eyes: takes away that hardness of spirit into which his folly had cast him; melts, moves, and stirs up the soul; raises up, and draws forth that cry which enters into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. Some persons think that a Christian never can sink so low as not to feel a cry in his soul. I believe he may indeed. But I will appeal to a better authority than mine, which is, Bunyan, in his "Pilgrim's Progress." We find Christian there shut up in the castle of Giant Despair. But it was only *after* he had been there a certain period that he and his fellow-prisoner began to cry, and sigh, and pray unto the Lord. Despair had stunned the cry in their soul before: it was

only about midnight that they began to pray. So when this poor "fool" gets into trouble, such a flood of despairing thoughts rushes into his mind, and he seems so shut up in hardness of soul, that there is little or no cry to God in his heart.

But the Lord does not leave him. There is an attempt at a cry; but still the heart is hard. There is not yet that compunction, that grief, that godly sorrow, that tenderness, that pouring out of the soul—all which is implied in the expression "cry." But when the Lord touches his heart with his gracious finger, so as to melt him down into real contrition, penitence, and sorrow for his folly, then with that spirit of compunction comes the spirit of grace and supplication; and then he cries, and that to a purpose. He cries, because he knows that none but the Lord can do him any good. He does not want man, nor the help of man. He knows that none but God can bless his soul. *He must appear; he must help; he must deliver; he must bring him out into the enjoyment of his presence.* Like Hezekiah, he turns his face to the wall, away from his courtiers, away from his flatterers, away from his friends, and looks only, wholly, and solely to the Lord. Or as poor Jonah, when he was in the belly of hell, with the weeds wrapped round his head, "Yet," he says, "I will look again toward thy holy temple." Jonah did not cry when he was asleep in the sides of the ship, nor when he was first thrown over-board. The weeds—fit emblem of his filth and folly—were first to be wrapped round his head, and he was to sink into the belly of hell. But when the Lord at last touched his heart with his gracious finger, then came the expiring cry, and the last longing, lingering look; and that cry, and that look came up into the ears and before the eyes of the Lord. Prayer, true prayer, lies deep in the soul. It is at the bottom of a man's heart; and therefore needs heavy weights and burdens to press out those few

drops of real supplication that lie low down in its hidden depths. "Then they cry to the Lord in their trouble."

IV.—But is this cry heard? Yes. "*He sent his word and healed them and delivered them from their destructions.*" He sent his word; nothing else would do. The poor "fool" might have examined his evidences, raked them together, and scraped them up; but O, they are all black and beclouded. Or he may have looked to the dealings of God with his soul in times past; but such a cloud of obscurity rests upon them that he cannot gather anything satisfactory out of them. His religion, and his profession of it, seem at times his greatest condemnation. Then what comfort can he get from it? In this pitiable plight, it is only a word from God that can settle the matter. All that friends may say is of no avail; God must decide the case. And he does decide it in his own time and way by sending his word, applying his truth, bringing home some sweet, and precious promise, and making the word of his grace to drop like the rain, distil like the dew, and fall with a divine weight and power into the soul. Now till this is the case, he cannot believe for himself what God says; he cannot mix faith with any promise however suitable, or any passage of Scripture however encouraging. But directly the Lord sends his word, and brings it home with heavenly power to the heart, immediately faith springs up and lays hold of the truth which God applies. As faith thus lays hold of the word, the word is brought into the soul. It penetrates at once into every corner of the heart; and as it diffuses itself, melts it, dissolves it, makes a way, and opens a channel for the mercy and grace of God to flow into.

What an effect a word from God can produce! Be it in reading, in hearing, on the knees, or in secret meditation; when a word drops from the Lord's mouth with any divine power into the soul, what a change it produces! And nothing but this divine power can ever bring the "fool" out of his

miserable condition! When this comes, it does the work in a moment; it heals all the wounds which sin has made, and repairs all the breaches in the conscience that folly has produced. One word from God heals them all. The Lord does not come as it were with plasters to heal first one sore and then another. He heals now as in the days of his flesh. When he healed then, he healed fully, at once, completely. The earthly doctor heals by degrees; he puts a plaster on one sore, and a liniment on another; and heals one by one. But when the Lord heals, it is done in a moment. The balm of Gilead flows over all the wounds, heals them up, and makes them perfectly whole. It is then with the soul as with the woman with the issue of blood; "she felt in her body she was healed of that plague." And this is healing. Any testimony from God, really from God, does it in a moment. If you can get but one word from God into your soul to make you believe you are a child of God, and interested in his pardoning love and mercy, every wound, though there be a million, yes, every wound will be healed instantaneously. This is the only healing worth having. To be healed by evidences is like being healed by plasters. You want an evidence here, and an evidence there, as a man that has his body full of sores wants a plaster upon every wound. One word from God is the real panacea, the true, the only "heal-all;" and Jesus (Jehovah-rophi, "the Lord my healer") the only true, infallible Physician. Would you be healed completely, you must look to the Lord, and not to man; be a Hezekiah, not an Asa.

Two blessed *consequences* follow. 1. "*He saved them out of their distresses.*" The word of the Lord does three things; it heals, it saves, it delivers. "He saved them out of their distresses." Not *in* their distresses; but *out* of them. He lifted them up and out. And this is the only way to be saved out of our distresses—to be lifted out of them into the bosom of God. Just as a man fallen into a deep pit is not delivered

whilst he is in the pit, but by being brought out; so when the Lord saves by some application of his precious truth to the soul, he brings it out of distress into his own bosom, into an enjoyment of his presence and mercy, and of a full, complete salvation. 2 *"He delivered them from their destructions."* O! how many things there are even to those who have the grace of God, which would, but for sovereign mercy, prove their destruction! Lawful things but for the grace of God might prove their destruction. Your shop, your business, your farm, your family, your worldly occupation, all might be your destruction but for the goodness and grace of God. But consider, besides, your temptations, snares, besetments, the lusts of the flesh, the pride of your heart, the carnality of your mind, would not all these things be your destruction but for the grace of God? John Bunyan says, "One leak will sink a ship; and one sin will destroy a sinner"—that is, one master sin. And who is there that has not some temptation, some besetment, some snare, some evil perpetually at work? Who is not, more or less, in the sieve of some powerful temptation which would prove, but for the grace of God, his destruction; and, as far as he could do it, has already destroyed his soul? "O Ephraim, thou hast destroyed thyself!" not 'Ephraim, if thou do not take very great care, thou wilt by and by destroy thyself;' but, "O Ephraim, thou hast destroyed thyself" already! And so have we destroyed our souls over and over again. Here is this temptation, this snare, this besetment, this trap of the devil—all ready to entangle our feet, and would prove again, and again, and again our destruction; ruin body and soul, and sweep us into hell without remedy, if the Lord did not interfere and interpose.

Here, then, is the "fool"—having destroyed his soul. All we can do (it seems an awful thing to say, but I believe it is true) is to damn our own souls; that is all we can by nature do. And what God has to keep us from is, to keep us from

damning ourselves. For our heart is so vile, our nature so corrupt; we are so bent upon backsliding, so deadly intent upon our idols, that God has to hold us from hurling our own souls to the bottomless pit.

How manly are our "destructions." And these "destructions" are like poison. We sip, and sip, and sip, not knowing there is poison in the draught. Its sweetness hides its venom. Arsenic is in every glass; the table is spread with wine; and to drink is to die. See how "the wine is the poison of dragons and the cruel venom of asps!" Look at our self-righteousness and pharisaic pride; is not that sufficient to destroy? Look at our carnality and worldly-mindedness, with all our reckless and vain thoughts; are not these sufficient to destroy? Look at our unbelief and infidelity; is not that sufficient to destroy? Look at the base lusts and sensual appetites; is there not enough poison of this nature in our heart to send a world to perdition? Look at the workings of despondency and despair; are not these sufficient to destroy? Watch the movements of our heart in the various circumstances of life. Is not there a snare in everything? In business, in our occupation, at home, abroad, wherever we go, in whatsoever company we fall, is not some secret snare hidden? And would not that entangle and destroy our souls but for the sovereign grace and mercy of God? A man does not know himself, nor the evil of sin, nor the wickedness of the human heart, nor the depth of the fall, who does not see and feel he has over and over again been entangled in things, which but for the grace of God would have been his eternal destruction. If he were to say he had not, I would not believe him, for I should know he either deceived himself or wished to deceive me; in other words, was an Antinomian, a Pharisee, or a hypocrite. For sure I am, if any one is acquainted with the depth of the fall, the wickedness and weakness of our Adam nature, and what a man can think, say, and do, when not upheld by the grace of

God, he will say, 'but for the grace of God I should again and again have rushed upon my own destruction.'

Then do not think me very hard this morning, if I have been calling you all "fools." I put myself into the catalogue. He that stands in the pulpit, and they that sit in the pew, all bear the same name, for they have the same nature. We are all "fools," for folly is bound up in our hearts. If we possess one particle of the grace of God, or one grain of heavenly wisdom, we shall say, 'Lord, I have been, am, shall be to my dying day a "fool," if thou do not give me wisdom, and keep me every moment of my life; aye, keep me as the apple of thine eye.'

Then you need not think yourself a very singular being as we sometimes do think ourselves, nor a very out-of-the-way wretch, since there are other "fools" in the world beside yourself. And if you are the character as traced here by the pen of inspiration, there maybe something in it to lift up your head, and encourage you to believe there is something still of the good work of God upon your soul. Christ is our wisdom; and as we feel our folly, it may by his grace make us, perhaps, more cautious for the future. The burnt child dreads the fire; and if entangled in this or that snare, we learn to rue the consequences, it may produce a holy watchfulness. He is a wise man who knows himself to be a fool. The greatest is he that does not know his own folly. Such an one resembles certain very clever personages, whom we used to meet with in the world. O, they knew everything; nobody could instruct them. They had not wisdom enough to see their own ignorance. So in grace. He is a wise man who knows himself to be a fool. It is not every professor of Calvinism who has got as far as this. If a sense of our own folly makes us prize that wisdom and teaching which comes from above, it may not be our worst lesson. We may have had to bitterly rue our folly; but if it has brought down our

pride and self-righteousness, made us hate and abhor ourselves in our own eyes, and opened a way for the free manifestations of God's superabounding grace, mercy, and truth, it may have been for our spiritual good, at any rate, it is better than being a "fool" and not knowing it. There are two kinds of fools; one that does not know his own folly, and he is the worst of fools; and there is another that does know it, and he is next door to becoming a wise man; for the deeper he sinks in a sense of his own folly, the higher he will rise into an apprehension of Christ as of God "made unto us *wisdom*, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption."