

The Precept and the Promise

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"Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long. For surely there is an end; and thine expectation shall not be cut off."
Proverbs 23:17, 18

The trials and perplexities that a Christian has to encounter in his way to heaven are not at first made known to him. The Lord deals with him as he dealt with the children of Israel when he brought them up out of Egypt. He never said a word to them about the wilderness. This was the message that Moses had to take to them: "And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their task-masters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land, flowing with milk and honey." (Exod. 3:7, 8.) In this absolute, unconditional promise of deliverance, we hear not a word about the wilderness that was to intervene between Egypt and Canaan; not a syllable about sojourning there for forty years before they got possession of the promised land. Thus the Lord deals with his people when he delivers them from the house of bondage. He sets before them the promised land as their sure inheritance, and kindles their desires after, and their affections towards it; but conceals from them the difficulties they will have to encounter, and the wilderness to pass through, in order to arrive there. We find a similar spiritual dealing with the soul pointed out in Hosea 2:14, "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her." The Lord allures her, leads her insensibly on, until at last she finds herself where she little

expected to be. We find the Apostle intimating a similar thing in the Lord's dealings with Abraham. "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should afterwards receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, *not knowing whither he went.*" (Heb. 9:8.) When the Lord called, he obeyed that call, not knowing where he was going; but he simply followed as the Lord led, in the obedience of faith. That the Lord thus deals with his people generally, we read: "And I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known." (Isa. 43:16.)

Now, there is great wisdom, as well as great mercy, that the Lord does hide these things from us. Were all the trials and difficulties of the way at first laid open and placed before our eyes, we could not bear it. Like the children of Ephraim, though armed and carrying bows, we should turn back in the day of battle. (Psa. 78:9.) This we find intimated respecting the children of Israel when they came up out of Egypt. "And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt." (Exod. 13:17.) The Lord knew how tender they were; and, therefore, so to speak, was careful not to frighten them, but led them gently on into the wilderness. And thus he hides from his people the trials and difficulties of the way, the enemies they will have to encounter, and the battles they will have to fight; until, in some measure, they are prepared to endure hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ.

We find, in the text, an exhortation given; and this exhortation accompanied with a promise. Now the exhortations that we meet with in God's word do not usually

fall gratefully on the ear; at least they do not on mine. They do not strike the mind as harsh, nor do they stir up the enmity and rebellion of the heart. But exhortations from the mouth of preachers often do grate upon the ear. Why is this? Whence arises the difference in our feelings? One reason is, because, when the precepts in the word of God come to us, they come with sweetness and savour; and thus they subdue and beat down the opposition that is in our hearts to them. Another reason is, because men are very rarely in a condition to enforce precepts. A man must stand pretty clear himself before he can exhort another. It will not do for a proud man to exhort to humility, nor for a man who is seeking his own to exhort to self-denial. A man must stand almost free from blemish before he can consistently handle the precepts; and, as there are very few who can stand on this ground, exhortation grates upon the ear, and rather stirs up enmity and rebellion, than produces any profitable effect. But it is not so with the precepts in the word of God; I can and do read them with sweetness, and feel at times a power communicated by the precept and through the exhortation, so as to produce a desire of conformity to it.

In the text, then, we find a precept; and this precept connected, as it generally is, with a peculiar state or temptation of soul. What a knowledge God has of the heart of man! as we read of Jesus, "He knew what was in man." (John 2:25.) Here, then, he puts his finger, so to speak, upon a sore place in a man's heart; and what is that? The envy of the carnal mind in God's people against the prosperity of the wicked. "Let not thy heart," he says, "envy sinners." He knew there was this envy in man's heart: Asaph felt it; (Psa. 73;) and his feet well nigh slipped through the temptation. Job experienced it, (21:6-15;) and "trembling took hold of his flesh." And nearly the whole of Psalm 37 is to counsel God's people against it, and support them under it. The Lord,

therefore, knowing what was in the heart of his people, thus meets it: "Let not thine heart envy sinners: but be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long:" as though it ran thus—How much better it is to be in the fear of the Lord, than be envying sinners; "for surely there is an end;" all their pride and vanity will come to a fearful issue; but "thine expectation of rest and peace shall not be cut off."

With God's blessing, in considering these words this morning we shall look, *first*, at the precept, "Be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long;" and *afterwards*, at the promise, or rather, the two promises connected with it, "For surely there is an end; and thine expectation shall not be cut off."

I.—The fear of the Lord is the grand distinguishing feature of a living soul from one dead in sin, as well as a special new covenant blessing. What says the Lord? "I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them to do them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me." (Jer. 32:40.)

The fear of the Lord, then, is a special new covenant blessing; and it is by its being implanted in a man's soul that he does not depart from God. Many will argue thus—"If a man be an elect vessel of mercy, he is sure to be saved, let him do what he pleases. It does not therefore matter how a man lives, if he be one of the elect." Now, how does God guard against such an awful perversion of his truth? In this way: "I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me." His fear in the heart is the sure fruit of election, and stands on the same ground with it. The first is a part of God's secret, and the second of his revealed will. Does he decree a soul to eternal life? He decrees that that soul shall walk in his fear. Where there is no fear implanted, there is no election manifested. Here we see the indissoluble

union between a vessel of mercy and his God. The eternal covenant binds God to him; and divine fear, planted in his heart, binds him to God. What an unspeakable mercy then it is to have the fear of the Lord implanted by his hand in the soul!

Now the Lord, speaking in the text, gives a precept, thus addressing himself individually to his saints. "Be thou (my son, my child), in the fear of the Lord all the day long." Some may say, "How can that be? Are there not many days, at least, are there not many hours in the day, in which there is no sensible fear of the Lord at all, and scarcely one spark of grace in exercise in the soul?" It is so often with me, I confess to my shame. How, then, it may be asked, can such a state be consistent with the precept in the text? I will endeavour to show you. The fear of the Lord, once implanted in a man's heart, is never lost out of it. It may not be in sensible exercise; but once implanted, it can never be eradicated. I may compare it, by way of illustration, to the love that a mother has to her children; she is not always showing her love. What then draws it forth? Circumstances. A fall, sickness, anything that grieves, harms, or pains the child, draws forth into exercise the maternal love which lay passive in the bosom until drawn forth. The love that a mother has to her child is always in her bosom. She never ceases to love her children; and yet there are hours or days perhaps when this love does not sensibly flow forth. Yet circumstances draw it forth in a moment. Thus with the fear of the Lord in our hearts. There are times when coldness, deadness, fretfulness, and rebellion seem so to prevail that it appears as if there were no fear of the Lord in the heart at all. And yet circumstances will draw it forth in a moment. Let, for instance, some sin be presented before your eyes, sweet and suitable to your carnal mind; or let some snare of Satan be discovered to you, the fear of the Lord will often start up

in a moment. Was it not so with Joseph? What were his words when temptation came before him? "How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9.) Was it not so with David when he stood over his mortal enemy, Saul, as he lay sleeping in the trench, and Abishai said, "Let me smite him, I pray thee, with the spear, even to the earth once?" The fear of the Lord sprang up in David's heart, and he said. "Destroy him not: for who can stretch forth his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless?" (1 Sam. 26:9.) So, when determined to avenge himself on Nabal for his churlish treatment, and Abigail met him by the way, how the fear of the Lord rose up in his soul at her words! "And David said unto Abigail, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, which sent thee this day to meet me: and blessed be thy advice, and blessed be thou, which hast kept me this day from coming to shed blood, and from avenging myself with mine own hand." (1 Sam. 25:32, 33.) Thus, as the carnal heart lays hold of the bait laid by Satan, the fear of the Lord, which was lying passive in the soul, will often spring up into exercise. This "fountain of life, whereby we depart from the snares of death," gushes forth in living waters to keep the soul back from rushing where the carnal heart would lead. Do not you find it so? There are times in your experience when you seem to have no more godly fear in lively exercise than if eternal things had never rested with power upon your soul; and yet there is a secret check that keeps you from evil. Amidst all your worldliness and carnality, there is that inward reverence of God; that inward desire to do his will; that inward cleaving to what he commands, and fleeing what he forbids, which not always sensibly, and yet secretly, keeps you from evil. I have found it so, and do more or less daily find it so. But what a blessed thing it is when this precept is carried into daily *sensible* exercise! O what a blessing it would be for the church of God if the precept were carried out in all its branches in the hearts, lips, and lives of God's

people! What evils it would stop! what a check it would put upon a man's tongue, upon a man's looks, upon a man's actions! There is no life so desirable as to be in the fear of the Lord all the day long, and to walk as feeling the eye of God perpetually upon us. How many painful, cutting reflections would it save us! How much would the church of God be spared that strife and contention, that wrath and bitterness by which she is almost torn to pieces! This was the blessed state of the Primitive Church. "Then had the Churches rest throughout all Judea, and Galilee, and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied." (Acts 9:31.)

What state is more happy and desirable than to feel, as every rebellious thought rises up within, the fear of the Lord immediately springs up to check or subdue it; that as pride, envy, jealousy, evil temper, covetousness, and lustings after forbidden things start up in the mind, there is a sentinel on the watch to sound the alarm, and preserve the heart's garrison from being surprised and captured by the enemy?

But this filial fear of the Lord will be accompanied by every grace and fruit of the Spirit. It is not a solitary grace; no grace is solitary; no grace thrives at the expense of the rest. Like the members of a human body, in its advance from infancy to manhood, all the graces of the spirit grow together in blessed proportion and harmony. It is not like the sucker of a tree which draws away the sap from the stem, so that you must pull up the sucker lest it injure the tree; but it rather resembles the branch of a tree, where root, stem, and boughs so thrive and grow in proportion to each other, that the flourishing of one contributes to the flourishing of the rest. Thus, when a man is so blessed as to be in the sensible fear of the Lord all the day long, every grace and every fruit

of the spirit thrive and flourish at the same time in his soul.

1. *Faith*, for instance, that choice fruit of the Spirit, will abound just as the fear of the Lord abounds. We only fear the Lord just so far as we believe in him; so that, when we are in the fear of the Lord all the day long, we shall be in the faith of the Lord all the day long.

2. We should also have *holy reverence* at the same time in blessed exercise. The Apostle joins together reverence and godly fear, and declares that both are the fruit and effect of grace. "Wherefore, we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear." (Heb. 12:28.) This reverence embraces a solemn recollection of God's presence, and a holy tenderness toward his name, his word, his will, his honour and glory.

3. *Heavenly-mindedness*, too, and *spirituality of affection*, would attend upon this godly fear. Were we in the fear of the Lord all the day long, what a delight there would be in reading the Scriptures; how truth after truth, and passage upon passage would come flowing into our heart; what sweet meditation there would be upon the Person, work, love, and blood of Jesus; what a feast we should have on God's word!

4. If, too, we were in the fear of the Lord all the day long, *how many sins would be nipped in the bud!* Our anger against a brother would never issue forth in harsh words and bitter reproaches. Such painful feelings would be confined to our own bosom, and would not be a leaven to ferment in the minds of others. All that train too of evil which has ruined the peace of hundreds of families, springing from the evil busts of our nature, commencing with unchecked desires, proceeding onwards to looks and words, and fulfilled in

abominable actions, would not proceed beyond the nature that engendered it.

5. This, too, would be one of the *sweetest and happiest lives we could live upon earth*. Were the fear of the Lord thus our treasure, pouring its riches into our heart, (Isa. 33:6), there would be strong confidence. (Prov. 14:26.) Our heart would not then so continually condemn us; and this would give us more confidence, as John speaks: "Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God;" (1 John 3:21); "the secret of the Lord would be more with us;" (Psalm 25:14); "we should sit under his banner with great delight;" (Psalm 60:4; Solomon's Song 2:4); "and we should lack no one good thing." (Psalm 34:9.)

What causes so much grief to a living conscience? Is it not the hardness, coldness, and deadness that lie like an icy crust upon the soul? Our vile thoughts, our carnal speeches, our foolish or inconsistent actions cut us out abundant work for sorrow of heart. It is a trouble to a living soul that he cannot live in the fear of the Lord all the day long but that, when he would do good, evil is present with him. And how, at times, he does plead with the Lord that he might live continually in his fear! It is indeed a sweet life. I cannot live it, though I desire to do so. But I have now and then been in this spot: and I am sure it is a blessed one to be in.

II.—But with this precept is connected the promise, or rather, the two promises, "For surely there is an end; and thine expectation shall not be cut off." I will endeavour to show you the connection.

1. The Lord is here addressing himself to a soul labouring under temptation, and passing through peculiar exercises; and this is the exhortation that he gives it: "Be thou in the

fear of the Lord all the day long;" watching his hand, submitting to his will, committing everything into his care and keeping; not hardening your heart against him, but looking up to him, and worshipping him with godly fear; "for surely there is an end." You may be tempted, exercised, and surrounded with difficulties, and see no outlet; but surely there is an end; and, when the end comes, it will make all plain and clear. This quiet submission, this watching and waiting, a man can never be brought to unless he has seen an end of all perfection; an end of his own strength, wisdom, and righteousness. To sit still is the hardest thing a man can do. To lie passive at God's footstool when all things seem to be against us; to have a rough path to walk in, to be surrounded with difficulties and yet to be in the fear of the Lord all the day long, watching his hand, desiring to submit to his will, seeking only that wisdom which cometh from above, and trusting that he will make the way straight; not putting our hand to the work, but leaving it all to the Lord—how strange, how mysterious a path! And yet it is the only one that brings solid peace to a Christian; "for surely there is an end." Whatever sorrows and troubles a man may have to wade through, there will surely be an end to them. If we try to get ourselves out of perplexities, we are like a person trying to unravel a tangled skein of silk by pulling it forcibly; the more it is pulled, the more entangled it gets, and the faster the knots become.

So, if we are plunged into any trial, providential or spiritual, and we attempt to extricate ourselves by main force, by kicking and rebelling, we only get more entangled. The Lord, then, to encourage us to wait patiently upon him till he shall appear, says, "Surely there is an end;" there is a day coming to the people of God when tears shall be wiped from all faces, however fast and bitter the tears may flow down now.

So, if there be a powerful temptation that the soul has to grapple with, which seems ready to overwhelm it, "surely there is an end;" there is a deliverance appointed out of the temptation.

So, if there be a burden of guilt and shame from backslidings and inconsistencies, "surely there is an end." The Lord will take the burden off, and relieve the soul by a sweet manifestation of atoning blood and pardoning mercy.

But we may observe a sweet connection between the precept and the promise in the text. It is as though the Lord said, "Be thou, my son, in the fear of the Lord all the day long." You have your exercises lasting all the day long; your temptations continuing all the day long; your griefs and troubles enduring all the day long. What are you to do? Can you break through them? Alas! to attempt that is like a man trying to rush through a thick thorn hedge; he may try to push through, but he will have to draw back pierced and wounded with the thorns. But be thou in the fear of the Lord all the day long; looking up to him, desiring to know his will and do it; not trying to make a way of escape yourself, but simply committing your way unto him, begging of him that he would work in you that which is well pleasing in his sight; "for surely there is an end," and this end will not be hastened by anything we can do. Have you not found in times past that when you have kicked like a wild bull in a net, it brought no deliverance? But, when you lay passive, waiting upon the Lord, he brought about an end? an end so unexpected, so glorious and sweet, that you could only bless the Lord's hand for doing so marvellously. This is the universal testimony of the Scripture that the Lord appears and delivers when there is none shut up or left; and the experience of the saints agrees with the testimony of the written word. "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, thoughts of peace, and

not of evil, to give you an expected end." (Jeremiah 29:11)

But there is another promise connected with the precept:
"And thine expectation shall not be cut off."

Now, whenever the Lord enables a soul to fulfil the precept, "to be in his fear all the day long," he usually gives some intimation that he will graciously appear in its behalf; and it is this intimation that raises up the "expectation." I want to show you this more fully. If you are in perplexities, temptations, exercises, or troubles, and you endeavour to cut out a way for yourself, the Lord will not give you any intimation that he will undertake your cause. But if the Lord enable you to be in his fear all the day long, not trying to do anything contrary to his will and word, he will give you an intimation that he will, sooner or later, appear. This is done in various ways. Sometimes by drawing the heart near to himself in fervent pleading with him. This is "a taking hold of his strength;" and the very power to do so raises up an expectation that he will answer that prayer. Sometimes there is a secret persuasion, though we cannot tell how or whence it arises, that the Lord will one day turn our captivity. Sometimes the Lord applies a promise to the soul that he will, in his own time and way, clear up the difficulties, and cause his light to shine in and through the darkness. It is this intimation that raises up the "expectation" spoken of in the text.

But, we may observe, wherever there is this expectation, there will be many things to try it. This seems intimated in the text, "thine expectation *shall not be cut off.*" The allusion seems to be to a figure that Hezekiah makes use of (Isa. 38:12), "I have cut off like a weaver my life; he will cut me off from the thrum." (*margin*). The "thrum," or thrums, are the threads that fasten the web to the loom; and you know

the last thing that a weaver does when he has woven his piece of cloth is to cut it off the thrums. Hezekiah, who had been hanging upon the mercy of God, as the piece of cloth hangs upon the loom, cries out in fear that God would cut him off, as the weaver cuts off his web. This, then, seems to be the allusion in the text, "Thine expectation shall not *be cut off*." The expectation may be tightly stretched, as the cloth upon the loom; it may have to endure many hard pulls; but it shall not be cut off. "I, the Lord, will not deal with the expecting soul as the weaver with the cloth on the loom. It shall not be disappointed: I will bestow a sweet and precious answer."

I before observed that this expectation is not a presumptuous claim upon the Lord, but a gracious persuasion in the soul, produced by an intimation of future good from the Lord himself. And I will tell you in some measure how you may know whether you have such a gracious expectation, or whether one only which arises from presumption. It is to be known by the effects which it produces. An intimation from God always raises up faith in the promise given; and the effect is to soften and meeken the heart, open the mouth in prayer, and produce a quiet waiting for the Lord to appear. We have this clearly set forth in Lam. 3:55-57: "I called upon thy name, O Lord, out of the low dungeon. Thou drewest near in the day that I called upon thee; thou saidst, Fear not." So with Hannah. In her case there was first the trouble, then the promise of the Lord by Eli, and then the effect; a quiet expectation, drying up her tears. "So the woman went her way, and did eat, and was no more sad." (1 Sam. 1:18.) Before the intimation comes, we are often stunned by the trial; but hoping it may pass over our heads, we do as people in a thunderstorm, look out to see if there is anywhere a patch of blue sky; and, if we see but a faint streak in the horizon, though it thunder, lighten,

and rain heavily, yet we know the storm will soon pass away. So it is with the soul; the storm may still beat; the thunder, lightning, and rain may be pouring forth; yet if there be but an intimation from the Lord that he will appear, it makes the soul watch the blue sky till the Sun of righteousness breaks in through the dark clouds. "Thine expectation," says the Lord, "shall not be cut off;" but it may be tried; and a good deal too.

You will find this was the way in which the Lord dealt with his servants of old. Abraham had a trial when he complained to the Lord. "And Abraham said, Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? And Abraham said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and lo, one born in mine house is mine heir." (Gen. 15:2, 3.) The Lord gave him a promise under this trial. "And behold, the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, so shall thy seed be." (Gen. 15:4, 5.) This promise Abraham received in faith, as we read, "And he believed in the Lord: and he counted it to him for righteousness." (Gen. 15:6). Here was the expectation. But was it not tried? A long period of twenty-five years between the promise and the fulfilment tried it sorely. But was the expectation *cut off*? Let Sarah answer. "And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me. And she said, Who would have said unto Abraham, that Sarah should have given children suck? for I have born him a son in his old age." (Gen. 21:6, 7.) And was it not so with David? Was not his expectation of sitting on the throne of Israel sorely tried? But it was not cut off. Thus the Lord always tries his own work in the soul. He sends his people

sharp trials and lays heavy burdens upon them to prove their faith; so that, though their expectation shall never be cut off, yet it shall be sorely tried.

Here we see the wide difference between presumption and faith. Presumption never waits upon the Lord. Presumption never comes with streaming eyes to a throne of grace; presumption is never tried by the devil, nor the unbelief of an evil heart; but stands up boldly and confidently without check or fear. But faith (I say faith, because faith and expectation are closely connected), hangs upon the promises of God in spite of all the difficulties and oppositions which it has to encounter. Presumption storms and blusters; is permitted for some time to hurry boldly on; but one flash hurls it down into despair. Faith waits quietly and patiently, and leaves the Lord to work; and then, when the end comes (and, surely there will be an end), how sweet it is to have put no hand of our own to the work, but to see the Lord's hand doing valiantly! we, as it was said to those of old, standing still! and seeing the salvation of God. Now, this path is one which no fowl knoweth, and the vulture's eye hath not seen—a path peculiar to the elect, and in which none but ransomed and quickened souls can walk. All others are for doing something themselves; avenging their own cause, and fighting their own battles; but "he that believeth shall not make haste." Trying indeed it is to flesh and blood to wait. Even Abraham partly failed here; and, almost questioning the fulfilment of the promise, would fain have a bond-child by fruitful Hagar, rather than wait for the promised son by aged Sarah.

Now, this is a religion that makes no noise in the world. It is not glittering enough for some people's eyes. It has not enough tinsel about it to blaze and shine far and wide. This quiet, gentle, humble, stay-at-home religion has not sufficient show or excitement for most. Something more

glittering and visible is preferred. It was so with the Pharisees of old. They asked of Christ "when the kingdom of God shall come," expecting some outward display, something to attract general observation and admiration. "No," says the Lord, "the kingdom of God cometh not with observation" (as it is in the margin, "with outward show"), "Neither shall they say, Lo, here, or Lo, there"—looking to see something wonderful in this direction or that. It is not an external thing at all. "Behold, the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:20, 21.) Religion, carried on in the conscience, is despised by most for want of outward show. Carnal nature cannot understand nor approve of a religion so quiet, unobserved, and unobtrusive. This inward work does not suit the carnal tastes of those who wish to appear to be something; and yet, where this secret waiting and looking is carried on in the hearts of God's people, when the end comes, we know how blessed it is not to have rushed heedlessly on, but to have waited patiently. Surely his hand will then appear most conspicuously. This is the religion that I want. I desire no other but "that secret which is with the righteous;" to be in the fear of the Lord all the day long: looking up to him for everything; simply believing that "surely there is an end, and an expectation which shall not be cut off."