

THE RIVER OF LIFE AND THE TREES ON ITS BANKS

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"And by the river upon the bank thereof, on this side and on that side, shall grow all trees for meat, whose leaf shall not fade, neither shall the fruit thereof be consumed: it shall bring forth new fruit according to his months, because their waters they issued out of the sanctuary: and the fruit thereof shall be for meat, and the leaf thereof for medicine." Ezekiel 47:12

The last nine chapters of the prophet Ezekiel contain in them much that is very mysterious. You will recollect that "in the visions of God," the prophet is "brought into the land of Israel, and set on a very high mountain by which was as the frame of a city on the south." But besides this city, he is shewn by his heavenly Guide a temple, of which there is a most minute and particular description, his Conductor measuring its breadth, length, and proportions. Into these details it is not necessary now to enter. But a question at once arises, whether this portion of God's word is to be understood strictly literally, or strictly figuratively. Some, and perhaps the large majority, consider that the objects presented to Ezekiel in vision were merely symbols of spiritual and experimental things. Others attach to the various things, so minutely detailed, a literal signification, and believe that they will all be fulfilled in times still future.

Which of these two interpretations is the true one, I do not feel competent to decide; but I do not see that one necessarily excludes the other. Even if we admit the literal interpretation, **that** no more excludes the spiritual than the literal existence of the ancient temple and its divinely

appointed furniture, as the ark and the candlestick, shut out their spiritual meaning. One thing at least is abundantly clear, that there is a striking connection between a portion of the vision that Ezekiel saw, and that which was revealed to holy John in the Revelation. For, in **Eze 47**, the chapter from which the text is taken, a "river" is seen issuing out of the door of the house, and upon the banks of this river, trees growing whose fruit was for meat and their leaf for medicine. Now this is nearly identical with what holy John saw in **Re 22**, where in vision he was shewn "a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb." There is, however, a difference between the two descriptions, which in itself is sufficient to shew that they are to be figuratively understood, for were they to be literally fulfilled there could be no such discrepancy nor inconsistency. John saw but **one** tree, "the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month;" but Ezekiel saw **trees**, numerous trees, "all trees," which bring forth not twelve manner of fruits, but new fruit according to their months.

In looking at the words before us, I will, with God's blessing, attempt to examine, in a spiritual and experimental light,

I.—**The River** which Ezekiel saw issuing from out of the threshold of the house eastward. And,

II.—**The Trees** which he saw growing on its banks, whose leaf never faded, and whose fruit was never consumed, the one supplying medicine for every disease, and the other food for every appetite. The Lord enable us to pluck this evening one or two of these medicinal leaves, and to eat some of this satisfying fruit.

I.—The prophet, then, was brought by his heavenly Guide unto the door of the house, and "beheld waters issuing out from under the threshold of the house eastward: for the forefront of the house stood toward the east, and the waters came down from under from the right side of the house, at the south side of the altar."

These "waters" are clearly identical with the "river" that John saw. But what did these "waters" and this "river" spiritually signify? **The eternal love of God** to the church, as flowing forth in the manifestations of grace, mercy and truth. For John saw this "river of water of life proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb." And what flows out of the throne of God and of the Lamb but the river of everlasting love? for, "God is love;" and he says to the church, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love." But as the church in her fallen condition is dead, therefore she must be quickened and made alive; it is then chiefly and specially a river of **life**; and this John expressly calls it, "a pure river of water of **life**, clear as crystal." Thus it betokens the communications of spiritual life to the souls of the elect. This river had, therefore, different degrees of depth and breadth.

This heavenly Guide went forth eastward with a line in his hand, and measuring a thousand cubits, brought the prophet through the waters: they were then up to the ancles. The course of this heavenly river and its degrees of depth and breadth seem to point to two different things: First, the gradual spread of the **outward** manifestation of grace in the gospel: and second, the degrees of the **inward** manifestation of grace in the soul. Thus, in the first promise that was given in Paradise to our fallen parents, that the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head, was the first manifestation of pardoning grace. The river of eternal love first, then, rose to view: but in their development the waters were as yet

shallow. They were but up to the ankles—a little rivulet. Thus also, in the first incomings of life into the soul, as well as in the experience of the love of God among many Christians, the waters are shallow; they do but bathe the ankles. But the divine Guide measured a thousand steps forward, and brought the prophet through the waters. They were then higher; **"they were to the knees."** The river of grace that had bathed the feet of Abel, Enoch, Noah, and the antediluvian saints, deepened and widened in the call of Abraham. The covenant promise "that in Him, and in his seed, all the nations of the earth should be blessed," flowed up to the knees of the patriarchs, no longer a rill, but a brook.

And thus there are those in the divine life round whose feeble knees the river of grace flows and strengthens and "confirms" them by its healing tide. But onward still the man with the line in his hand advances, and the waters are now to the loins. If "the ankles" denote the **antediluvian**, and "the knees" the **patriarchal** times, "the loins" may represent the **prophetical** period, when the outward manifestations of grace in a coming Messiah assumed a deeper, broader character. And, viewed experimentally also, the inward flow of life and love is in some up to the loins, bathing them with divine strength. If the ankles represent "babes," and the knees "the children" in whom the spirit of prayer is warm, the loins may typify "the young men" who "are strong and... have overcome the Wicked One." But the Guide still moves on, and now "the waters were risen, waters to swim in. a river that could not be passed over." And may not this aptly represent the days of Christ and his apostles—especially the mighty pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, when the river of mercy, grace, and truth, the river of life and love became a river to swim in, and three thousand souls bathed in its stream in one day?

II.—But we will look, with God's blessing, a little more closely still at this "river." One important feature is its **source and origin**. This is "the sanctuary" as seen in the visions of Ezekiel: "Their waters, they issued out of the sanctuary." In John it is said to be "the throne of God and of the Lamb;" thus identifying the sanctuary with the throne of God and his dear Son.

There is something very significant in the word "**sanctuary**," as denoting the source whence these waters flow. I need not mention that it means the holy place, and was especially used of the tabernacle where God dwelt between the cherubims. God is holy; his name, his nature, is perfect holiness. Thus, these waters flow out of the bosom of that unspeakably holy Jehovah before whom the seraphs veil their faces, and cry, "Holy, holy is the Lord of Sabaoth." Though it is a pardoning love, flowing down to vile, unworthy, unholy sinners, yet it issues out of the holy bosom of a Triune Jehovah. But John saw it flow "out of the throne of God and of the Lamb," signifying the certainty and perpetuity of its source, as well as its union with the mystery of the incarnation. In Ezekiel it is therefore seen to flow down at the south side of the altar, pointing out its connection with the sacrifice and sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ. What so firm, so stable, so immovable as the throne of God? and what so gracious, so compassionate as the throne of the Lamb? The Lamb for sinners slain, the crucified Man of Sorrows, is set down with the Father in his throne, as he himself declares, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne" **Re 3:21**. Out of this throne does this river take its source.

II.—But having looked at this "river" in its source, and seen a little of the increasing breadth and depth of the streams, we may now consider its **course**. "Then said he unto me, These waters issue out toward the east country, and go down into the desert, and go into the sea: which being brought forth into the sea, the waters shall be healed." To understand this, we must reflect a little upon the local situation of Jerusalem: for it was to Jerusalem that the prophet had been brought in the visions of God from Chebar in the land of Assyria. The Dead Sea lies to the east of Jerusalem, and the intervening country is a wild track of wilderness. Ezekiel, then, in vision saw the river flow eastward, and passing through the wilderness bury itself in the bottom of the Dead Sea, that well-known sulphurous lake; the ancient site of Sodom and Gomorrah. The river flows **eastward**. This seems to point to the future triumph of the gospel. Hitherto it has flowed **westward**, leaving the east to heathenism and Mahometanism; but the day will come when not only "the kings of Tarshish and the isles" **Europe and the West**, "but the kings of Sheba and Seba" **the monarchies of the East** "shall offer gifts."

But the waters flow **through the desert into the Dead Sea**. Can we find in all the word of God two more striking symbols of the human heart? Is not man's nature **a desert**, a ruined waste? Does anything good naturally grow there? Is it not wholly overrun with thistles, thorns, and briars? Is it susceptible of any cultivation? Can any human art, can any natural skill, make the wilderness blossom like the rose? Here false religion differs from true. False religion admits to a certain extent that the heart is naturally a desert, but insists on the ability of man to cultivate it. It puts into his hand an unlimited assortment of agricultural implements, and bids him cultivate this absolutely barren soil—with about as much success as if he ploughed the Alps, or sowed the wilderness

of Sinai. True religion teaches that the heart is a desert, and that no skill or industry of man can alter its nature; but that grace, and grace alone, brings forth in it and out of it the fruits of righteousness.

But the Holy Spirit employs another figure to set forth the nature of man, and to my mind a more expressive one could not well be chosen—I mean, **the Dead Sea**. You know what the Dead Sea is, and has been for centuries—a solemn and awful memorial of the judgments of God. Once there stood upon its site five flourishing cities—Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboim, and Bela. At the intercession of Lot, Bela **afterwards called Zoar** was spared: but on the four devoted cities the wrath of God fell. Fire and brimstone descended from heaven, burnt them up, with all their inhabitants, and turned that flourishing valley into a standing lake. What a figure of man's utter ruin! Man in his primitive state was like that well-watered vale, which for beauty and fertility was "as the garden of the Lord," in which Lot pitched his tent; but when Adam fell, that beautiful vale was turned into a salt and fetid lake. It is emphatically called the Dead Sea, as destitute in its waters of animal, and on its banks of vegetable life—apt image of the dead soul of man! And as the Dead Sea is said to exhale a fetid and poisonous vapour, so does the human heart ever exhale the noisome steam of sin.

IV.—But the river in taking its course through the wilderness, and into the Dead Sea, has to create a change in them. It has to make the wilderness blossom; to communicate life to that sea which is emphatically dead; for we read, "These waters issue out towards the east country, and go down into the desert, and go into the sea: which being brought forth into the sea, the waters shall be healed. And it shall come to pass that every thing that liveth, which moveth,

whithersoever the rivers shall come, shall live; and there shall be a very great multitude of fish, because these waters shall come thither: for they shall be healed; and every thing shall live whither the river cometh" **Eze 47:8,9**. So when the river of God's grace, that "river of God which is full of water," flows into the human heart, it communicates fertility and fruitfulness to the barren desert, life and motion and health to the Dead Sea. What a wondrous change do the grace, mercy, and truth of God create in a sinner's heart! For want of this river, how much religion is there without root or fruit! As Berridge justly says,

No real goodness long can stand Which planted is by human hand,
It dies as soon as born.

A man may plant, sow, weed and water; but the first breath of divine displeasure withers all the produce: and the first burning ray of the sun of temptation makes it like the grass on the house-top. But let the grace, mercy and love of God be felt in a sinner's heart: let, according to the promise, "waters break out in the wilderness and streams in the desert," then the Lord plants therein "the cedar, the shittah tree, and the myrtle, and the oil tree:" and all this, "that they may see, and know, and consider, and understand together, that the hand of the Lord hath done this, and the Holy One of Israel hath created it" **Isa 41:20**. Under this divine watering and planting alone are produced the fruits of the Spirit.

v.—But the river does not tarry in the desert, nor lavish all its waters there. It speeds on in its vivifying course to the Dead Sea. There too it makes a wondrous change. "Which being brought forth into the sea, the waters shall be healed." I need hardly stop to prove that the Dead Sea is here spoken of, for no other sea lies to the east of Jerusalem, and two towns are specially named which stood on its banks, Engedi

and Eneglaim, the former retaining almost its name to this day. The waters of this river are unspeakably salt and brackish, impregnated with sulphur, and covered with bitumen. But they are "healed" by the river of the sanctuary. They then become fresh and sweet. And what can heal the salt and bitter waters of the human heart? Their tossing and heaving cannot make them fresh and sweet. Nay, as the waters of Jordan have for centuries run into the Dead Sea, and it is brackish still, so all counsels and resolutions, vows and promises may be poured into the heart of man' but they cannot sweeten its bitter waters. Pride, envy, lust, unbelief still reign. But the river of life "heals" the waters. The misery of sin, the curse of the law, remorse of conscience, enmity against God, dislike of his will and way—the bitter waters that make life a burden and death a terror—are healed by the streams that issue out of the sanctuary.

II.—But we turn back from viewing the Dead Sea into which this river pours its healing streams to look at the trees which the prophet in vision saw growing on its banks. "Now when I had returned, behold, at the bank of the river were very many trees on the one side and on the other" **Eze 47:7**. The object and use of these trees are described in the words of our text by the heavenly Guide. "And by the river upon the bank thereof, on this side and on that side, shall grow all trees for meat, whose leaf shall not fade, neither shall the fruit thereof be consumed: it shall bring forth new fruit according to his months, because their waters they issued out of the sanctuary: and the fruit thereof shall be for meat, and the leaf thereof for medicine."

I.—Viewing the river as emblematic of the flowing forth of mercy, grace and truth, life, light, liberty and love, as revealed in the gospel, we must understand "the trees" on either bank as typical of blessings connected with the gospel.

We may therefore consider the trees to represent the ordinances of God's house, what are commonly called 'means of grace.' I shall, with God's blessing, endeavour therefore to shew how these "trees" represent these ordinances and means.

You will observe that these "trees" grow on either side of the "river." They are therefore connected with the manifestation of grace in the gospel; they run as it were parallel with the gospel; and derive from it all their beauty, power and efficacy. Trees in hot countries were planted by the side of waters, for there only could they flourish. "He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water" **Ps 1:3**. "He shall be as a tree planted by the waters" **Jer 17:8**. Thus, in the trees which the prophet saw; they stood on either bank, deriving from the river all their virtue and sap. Their roots spread themselves down to the flowing stream; their branches drooped over and inhaled the vapour and dew which rose up from it in the cool evening. The waters issuing out of the sanctuary flowed into their roots, imparting medicine to the leaves and nourishment to the fruit. It says expressly, "It shall bring forth new fruit, because their waters they issued out of the sanctuary." So the ordinances of God's house, and what are called 'means of grace,' derive all their balm and all their food from their being watered by the pure river of water of life.

1. Look at the **word of God** itself. Is not the word of God a blessed ordinance whereby the soul is healed when sick and fed when languishing? "He sent his word and healed them." But what gives the word of God its balm and its food? This tree stands on the river brink; the waters of life flow through it into the leaves—the texts and passages that clothe its branches—and into the fruit that hangs upon the boughs. Salutary medicines are generally bitter. Such often are the

leaves upon this tree. The soul needs reproofs, warnings, admonitions, as well as cordials and tonics. The roasted paschal lamb was to be eaten "with bitter herbs," and "to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet." But the soul needs also at times healing balm, when cut and wounded by sin and shame. The leaves in this tree—the promises and consolations—have then a healing efficacy. The **fruit** too—the truth as it is in Jesus, the declarations of mercy and peace, the revelation of grace and truth in the scriptures—derives all its food "because the waters issued out of the sanctuary." What is the word of God without life and feeling, without balm to the conscience or food to the soul?

2. Take again **prayer**. Separate prayer from the grace, mercy, love and truth of God—what is it? Unless the mercy and grace of God had been revealed in Jesus, there would have been no warrant for prayer. Devils pray not, for there is no promise of mercy, no Redeemer provided for them. Prayer is a gift from above: "I will pour upon the house of David... the spirit of grace and of supplications." Grace and supplications go together. The river of life waters the roots of prayer; into its streams the branches dip; and by what is beautifully called in Job, "the scent of water," that is, the vaporous breath that bathes its leaves, does it spring forth and grow.

3. So the **preaching of the gospel** is a tree of life. Many can bless God for a preached gospel. It has been a tree of life to thousands and tens of thousands. But whence does the gospel derive its efficacy? Not from the eloquence of the pulpit, the learning of universities, or the wisdom of academies; but because it dips its roots into the river of life, and draws out thence sap and juice that make the fruit thereof to be for meat, and the leaf for medicine.

4. And what is **reading of the scriptures**? "The book of the law," said the Lord to Joshua, "shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night" **Jos 1:8**. "Search the scriptures," said the blessed Lord in the days of his flesh. The life of God in the soul is fed by the scripture. The word of God is indeed a tree of life, on which new fruit is ever growing, and its leaves are for the healing of the nations. "I am the Lord that healeth thee." But it is only a tree of life as it stands on the bank of the river. We may read the Bible with the greatest regularity: we may have our morning portion, and our evening chapter allotted out with the greatest nicety. Nay, we may devote our life to the study and perusal of the Bible, and yet never pluck from it so much as a leaf or gather one ripe fruit. It is good to read the Bible: but that is not sufficient to make a Christian. The river of life must bathe the roots of our Bible reading, and then when wounded there will be a leaf to pluck, and when hungry food to eat.

5. So with **Christian conversation**. The communion of saints, the intercourse that God's people have with each other, the talking often one to another **as Malachi speaks** of the Lord's goodness and mercy is a tree of life; but only so as it stands on the river bank, and dips its roots down into the stream. What is religious conversation, so called, but idle gossip, except it be impregnated with the grace and love of God? What is much that is called Christian conversation but mere slander, or gossiping news mongering about churches and ministers? Religious tea parties, anniversaries, and too often ministerial visits, what are they, for the most part? "Trees... twice dead, plucked up by the roots." With leaves all withered, and fruit all wizened, there they lie prostrate on the bank like a mouldering pollard willow. And the reason why religious conversation so often degenerates into slander, detraction and gossip is, because this so-called conversation

is not a tree of life that stands upon the brink of this immortal river. But let Christian conversation and the intercourse of saints be a tree of life; let it dip its roots down into the love of God, and draw sap and vigour out of this living river, then it brings forth fruit for meat, and leaves for medicine.

6. So with the **ordinances of God's house**. How is baptism a tree of life, except as growing on the river bank, and dipping its roots down into the water of life? The baptismal pool does not make baptism a spiritual ordinance. In thousands of cases it is but a formal ceremony. But when it is impregnated with the life of God; when its roots are dipped into the streams of eternal love, then, as many have found, it bears fruit for meat, and leaf for medicine.

7. So with the **Lord's Supper**. Take away the grace, love, and mercy of God out of the Lord's Supper, and what is it? It is but an empty form. But let the ordinance of the Lord's Supper dip its roots into the love of God, then it bears fruit for meat, and leaf for medicine.

II.—But the prophet says of these trees: "**Their leaf shall never fade, and their fruit shall never be consumed.**" In Eastern countries trees soon fade, and the fruit is soon consumed, if they do not stand by the side of a river. They need to be constantly irrigated at their roots in order to maintain verdure of leaf and perpetuity of fruit. Thus, it is said of these trees that "their leaf shall never fade, and their fruit never be consumed." In other words, their leaves shall ever be green, and their fruit shall ever grow. Now this is the beauty and blessedness of real religion, vital godliness, the genuine work of God upon the soul, that it never dies. All other religion fades, withers and decays. It has no stamina in it; there is no healthy verdure in the leaf; no beautiful

fragrance in its flower; no sweetness or nourishment in the fruit.

III.—But the beauty of these trees of life is this, that **their leaf never withers**. In real religion, in the sweet teaching of the Holy Spirit, there is always something fresh, always something new, always something blessed. It is like our daily bread which the Lord bade his disciples ask for—"give us this day our daily bread." It never cloy, satiates, or disgusts. So with this blessed tree of life: the leaf never fades, but is always green, fresh and healing. The fruit, too, is never consumed; there is enough, and to spare; enough, and more than enough to supply all the wants of God's people, in all times, ages, and circumstances.

See how this runs through every means of grace! You come to hear the word of God. How cold your heart is! how dead and dry! how stupid and barren! But there is something said, which seems in a moment to touch, soften and melt it. What is this? A green leaf from the tree of life. Ah, here too is fruit that is never consumed. You may eat and eat again, and never be weary of eating.

So with prayer. What a burden prayer often is to a living soul! He goes to it without any feeling: but let him upon his knees have his heart softly touched by the Spirit of God; let his spirit be sweetly melted by a sight of Jesus: let him find anything like real access—what a blessedness there is then conveyed to the soul! what a reviving communicated! what strength imparted!

So with Christian conversation. Sometimes we seem afraid to meet a child of God—ashamed even to see him, feeling ourselves utterly unworthy even to speak to God's family. From this disinclination of our carnal mind, if we see them at

a distance we could almost turn down a street to avoid them: and if we do get into their company sometimes, we leave them with our hearts rather discouraged and cast down than refreshed. But let Christian conversation be touched with the grace and love of God; let heart be knit to heart in the sweet bonds of fellowship and love; let something be said that meets an echo in our bosom, something which finds its way into our breast, how sweet and blessed Christian conversation then becomes; and how it seems to strengthen, refresh, and comfort the soul.

So with the ordinances of God's house. What is Baptism; what is the Lord's Supper, except the Lord be there? Let the Lord be there, how fresh it is: every leaf that grows upon the tree of life is filled with verdure, and every particle of fruit that grows upon the boughs is meat—juicy, savoury, blessed meat to the soul.

IV.—But it is said to bring forth "**new fruit according to his months.**" There is always something new in the things of God. Here is a passage perhaps in the Word of God that we have read and read again and again without seeing or feeling anything in it; but all of a sudden there may come a blessed flash of light upon it; we now see something in it that we have never seen before, something exceedingly sweet and precious. It is now all new; it is received as new, felt as new, fed upon as new, relished as new. It seems as though we never saw anything in the passage before. So with prayer; so with hearing. You may perhaps have had your soul shut up in distress and bondage and misery for months; you could scarcely trace anything of the life of God in you. But under the preached word, it may have pleased God to drop something, which has come into your heart with warmth, and life, and feeling. O how new it is! It is as new as though it was never heard before: it seems as though the eyes were

now first opened, to see new things, and the ears were opened to hear new things, and the heart opened to receive new things. The Lord thus fulfils that blessed promise, "He that sat upon the throne said. Behold, I make all things new! If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away, behold all things are become new."

Now this distinguishes real religion, the work of the Spirit, from dead, dry, formal profession. There is nothing new, green, flesh in the religion of the flesh. That is all stale, like the mouldy bread, clouted shoes, and worn-out garments of the Gibeonites. They have trodden and trodden the shoe till they have worn it into holes; and then they clout it and cobble it with a piece of old leather. The bread has been so long in their vessel, that it has become dry and mouldy; and their clothes are ready to drop from their backs. Not so with the religion of the Spirit. The "preparation of the gospel of peace," is a shoe that never wears out, which wants no cobbling or clouting; the bread of life that comes down from heaven is like manna gathered day by day, always fresh and always reviving; and the robe of Christ's righteousness is never sullied or old.

v.—But, we may observe, that not only is the fruit for meat, but the **leaf is for medicine**. Now medicine is of various kinds. There is not only sweet medicine, though that is rare; but bitter. There is medicine, which heals, and there is medicine which racks and pains. There is the keen knife of the surgeon, and the blister of the apothecary; the sharp caustic and the swathing bandage. So with the leaves that grow upon the tree of life. Do not think that no leaf grows upon this tree but what heals wounds. There are bitter leaves as well as sweet; "myrrh and aloes" grew in the bride's garden as well as "calamus **i.e. the sweet cane** and cinnamon" **So 4:14**. You may come, for instance, to hear the

word of God, and what may you get? Comfort? No: you are not in a fit state to receive comfort: you want reproof, and you get it, and go home with a wounded conscience and a pained, groaning heart. Something is said which cuts you to the quick. Well, is not that a leaf? Is that bad medicine that sends you groaning home with a cry in your soul, keeping you awake half the night rolling upon your bed, begging the Lord to search and try if you are a hypocrite? Has not that been for some good? Has it not been a medicine more suitable than a cordial? A cordial might intoxicate and stupify the brain: but the latter leaf has wrought groans and sighs in the heart.

So in **reading the Word of God**. Perhaps you read for comfort: but you do not need comfort: you want a sharp reproof: you have got into a carnal state of mind: and what you want is, like a naughty child, not bread and jam for your supper, but to be shaken and well whipped. Remember, that there is a rod hung up in the spiritual nursery, and you will find the inventory of it in **Ps 89**. This you get. A sharp keen reproof enters your soul from God's word, that makes you tremble. Does not this do good? Does not this stir up prayer, and make you sigh and cry, and groan to the Lord to visit your soul with his presence and mercy?

So in **Christian conversation**. You often get reproof, you say, 'I fear after all I am nothing! O how spiritually-minded my friend is! What a deep, blessed experience he has! How he can speak of the goodness and mercy of God! And what a stupid, barren thing am I!' Has this conversation all been thrown away? Has it not been a leaf? aye, and a good leaf too, though a bitter one. And has not this leaf been medicine to purge away carnality, to stir you up, and make you seek a clearer manifestation of the mercy, goodness and love of God?

So with the **ordinances of God**, how they sometimes reprove us! A woman some time since joined our church. She was present at a baptism in this chapel last year; and what was said from the pulpit about the due qualifications of a candidate cut her to the very heart, and sent her groaning home. As she was crossing Fitzroy Square the Lord was pleased to speak a promise to her soul. Was not reproof and promise alike a leaf? Some who witnessed the same ordinance might have had consolation; she got reproof, and yet that reproof worked for her spiritual good; for it led afterwards on to the promise and a clearer manifestation. It is a great mistake to think the preaching of the gospel, or reading God's word, or Christian conversation is always to convey comfort. We are often so carnal that comfort to us would be little short of poison; it would drug us well-nigh to death, and we should fall asleep under the bewitching influences of the' intoxicating draught. We want something to rouse, stir, condemn, pierce, wound, at times almost to slaughter, and send the soul with cries and groans to the throne. And such should be the gospel ministry. If it be a tree of life, it should bear fruit for meat, and leaf for medicine: there should be in it fruit as meat for God's people, that they might have sometimes a sweet and savoury meal under the truth, and sometimes get a leaf to heal a sore, or produce a blister.

These waters, we read, issued out of the sanctuary: the trees therefore that grow upon the river's banks are always laden with leaves and fruit. Their leaf never fails; their fruit is never consumed. Thus, whilst there is a church on earth, and a God in heaven; whilst there is a people to be saved, and a Saviour to save them, so long will these trees grow upon the river's bank, and so long will they bring forth fruit for meat, and leaf for medicine—and all for the people of God. Every

means of grace, and every ordinance, is intended either to be for meat or for medicine. As, therefore, the love of God is an overflowing river, so long as this river flows, so long will the means of grace and the ordinances of God's house stand, flourish and bear fruit.

This is the grand source of all the encouragement, which a minister has to preach the gospel. "Because I live, ye shall live also." "My word shall not return unto me void." And how this, too, should encourage hearers to make use of every means of grace. We sometimes are backward in this matter. 'O,' it will be said sometimes, 'why need I go to chapel? I have so much to do this Tuesday evening. Have I not plenty of business to attend to? I have gone before, and I have got no good; I think I will stay at home to-night.' A man may go on indulging this slothful frame till he never goes to hear at all. Another may say, 'I have read the Word of God day after day, but I cannot get any comfort out of it: I do not seem to find anything in it that suits or blesses my soul. Why should I read it any more?' A third may say, 'I try to pray, but I get no answer; why need I pray any longer?' But so said the ungodly king when there was a famine in Samaria **2Ki 6:33** . A fourth may say, 'I go amongst the people of God: I never get any good: I will have a little worldly society, and not go amongst those who profess religion.' And a fifth may say, 'I will not join a church: what are the ordinances? There is nothing saving in them: I may just as well be out of the church as in it.' What a slothful, Antinomian spirit a man may soon get into!

Bear in mind, then, that these means are of God's appointing: trees planted by his own hand on each side of the river: and their fruit and efficacy depend not upon man's appointment, but upon the appointment of God. Often when we break through the snare that I have been speaking of,

leading us to slight or neglect them, we find there is a blessing couched in them. Sometimes when members of my church have called to see me, I have felt perhaps in my mind a kind of disinclination to their conversation, I am busy writing or reading, and do not want to be disturbed. But when they have come in, and sat down, and begun to talk, and my heart has felt a union with what they said, all the ice is thawed away, and I enjoy their company. Have you not felt the same? So sometimes in going to chapel, it has been dragging my body to the place, so cold and dead and lifeless, nay, feeling an aversion to the employment. I felt this lately once at home, so that I actually disliked the chapel, the people, and the preaching. But that evening I was favoured in my soul, and how differently did I leave the pulpit from going into it! I felt a love to the people and to the work, and was as comfortable as I was before just the contrary.

So in **secret prayer**. We would make every excuse to defer and put it off; yet when we are enabled at last to go to the throne, are we not sometimes graciously helped, feel a spirit of prayer, and enjoy access to pour out our hearts at the footstool of mercy? So with the other ordinances of God's house. There is in our wicked hearts a dreadful, I was going to say a damnable repugnance against them, a working up of the scum of that "carnal mind which is enmity against God." I do not say that all feel this. I was not born religious, as some are, who, from natural piety, seem to know little or nothing of the dreadful struggles of the carnal mind against everything spiritual and heavenly. But when we are able by the grace of God to resist these devilish workings, and are enabled to wait upon the Lord in the ordinances of his house, a sweetness is sometimes diffused through them. Some set up the ordinances too much, others value them too little. Some make them the river, and others will hardly allow them to be the trees on its banks. They are not the river, but they

stand on its brink, and are fed by its waters. Apart from the river, they are nothing: laved by its streams, their fruit is food, and their leaf is medicine.

Now this is a very different thing from setting up the ordinances of God's house, or the means of grace, as possessing an innate virtue. **That** is popery—attaching a sacramental grace necessarily to an ordinance, as if laying on of hands could convey the Holy Spirit, or sprinkling a child's face could regenerate the soul. Neither scripture nor common sense justify such religious jugglery. The trees in themselves would only wither and die were their roots not by the river. Thus we must always view the ordinances of God's house, and the means of grace in their connection with the appointment of God, and the love, mercy, and grace displayed in the Saviour. Then may we hope the preaching of the word will be blest; then may we hope that Christian conversation will be blest; that prayer at the throne of grace will be blest; that reading and searching the scriptures will be blest; and thus take sweet encouragement to believe that God, who has appointed his means, will bless them to our soul's edification and comfort.