

THE SWEET LOATHED AND THE BITTER RELISHED

Preached on Thursday Evening, July 20th, 1843, at Zoar Chapel, Great Alie Street, London

"The full soul loatheth an honeycomb; but to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet." Prov. 27:7

In revealing the Scriptures God has seen fit to give them to us under different forms. A large portion, for instance, of the Scriptures consists of history, as the historical books of the Old Testament, and the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles of the New. Another considerable portion of Holy Writ is revealed in the form of prophecy, as the prophetic books of the Old Testament, and the Revelation of John. Another portion is in the shape of epistles or letters, as the Epistles in the New Testament. Another portion is in the form of devotional meditations, hymns, and prayers, as is more particularly the case with the Book of Psalms, and other scattered portions of God's Word. And another shape in which God has been pleased to reveal His mind in the Scriptures is that of Proverbs, that is, short sentences, moral apothegms, under which spiritual instruction is couched. There is perhaps no book in Scripture that contains deeper wisdom and a more experimental vein of divine truth than the Book of Proverbs; and its beauty consists much in this, that under apparently mere moral sentences the deepest spiritual wisdom is taught; so that whilst the world may see in the Proverbs much to admire in a moral sense, the child of God, enlightened by the Spirit, sees much to admire and much to feel in a spiritual sense; and whilst the carnal are playing with the shell, God's people are at times privileged to feed upon the kernel. I need scarcely bring forward instances of this twofold meaning, as we can scarcely read a single verse of the book of Proverbs which does not more or less

contain it. Even the text, which we shall find, I hope, with God's blessing, to contain a savoury meaning and a sweet flavour of experimental truth, has a natural as well as a spiritual signification. It is true literally that a man when full-fed loathes even the sweetest food; and it is also literally true that to one who is hungry even food which is bitter, so long as it is nutritious, is sweet.

But we need not trespass on time and patience by entering into the literal meaning of the text; that is sufficiently obvious: and therefore we pass on to consider the spiritual and experimental vein of truth that lies couched under it. And in so doing I mean, with God's blessing to break it up into two distinct portions, so as to explain, as far as the Lord shall enable me, more clearly its spiritual meaning.

"The full soul loatheth an honeycomb; but to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet."

I. Who is this "full soul?" He is one whom God has never quickened by the Holy Ghost into spiritual life, one lying still in the death of nature. But is that all? Will that be a sufficient description of what the Holy Ghost means by the expression, "a full soul?" We must add something to the definition I have already given to afford us a clear idea of the meaning of the words. It represents, then, not so much one dead in sin, as one dead in a profession; it points out not so much the carnal who make no profession whatever of religion, as those who make a pretension, and nothing but a pretension, to the possession of godliness.

But let us, with God's blessing, enter a little into details. Generalities do not suit God's people. They want something particular—something that shall come direct to the point—something that shall anatomize the inward man, dissect him,

lay him bare, and point out what a child of God is, and what a child of God is not; so that each may have a testimony in his own conscience whether he is under the teachings of the Holy Ghost or not.

"The full soul," then, we may define by one single expression, as "*one full of self.*" Self in one or other of its forms has complete possession of him; and he has never yet taken that first step which the Lord of life and glory lays down as the door of entrance into His kingdom: "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me" (Matt. 16:24). Self has never been denied, or crucified; and he is therefore full of self, because it has never received a death blow in him. But this self is such a hypocritical creature; he can wear such masks, he can assume so many forms, he can rise to such heights, he can sink to such depths, he can creep into such holes and corners, that it will not be sufficient for me to say that "a full soul is full of self," unless I try to act the part of the police, so as to find out the felon, track him to his hiding-place, and drag him out into the light of day.

1. One form of self then is *self-righteousness*; and we can scarcely believe what a subtle wretch this said self-righteousness is. There are many persons who would scorn the idea of being Pharisees, in whom the heart-core of Pharisaism never has been touched. And I believe in my heart and conscience that every man is a double-dyed and treble-distilled Pharisee, unless God has begun and is carrying on the work of grace in his heart; and perhaps the greatest Pharisees that walk abroad in the light of day are some in a Calvinistic profession of religion, who have a name to live, but in the eyes of God are dead in sin. Unless a man is taught and brought to know experimentally these two things—the law and the gospel—he must be more or less a

Pharisee. If he knows nothing of a sentence of inward condemnation and death under which he falls down before the throne of the most high God a ruined wretch without hope or strength, the heart-core of Pharisaism is not yet touched in him. And if he do not know more or less of the gospel, so as to see by the eye of faith a blessed and a blessing Jesus, Pharisaism will still lurk and work within him. A man must rest upon *something*; and if he do not rest by faith on the blood and righteousness of the Son of God, he must rest more or less upon himself.

2. But again, "the full soul" is one also who is *full of notions, doctrines, views, sentiments, and opinions*; but none of which he has received from God. The deception of the human heart is past the power of man, and I might say of angels, to dissect. The depths of human hypocrisy are beyond the ken of the most keen-eyed man to scrutinize, and beyond the power of the ablest man to lay bare. Now, there are hundreds who have received from books or from ministers sound gospel doctrines; but as to receiving them from God into a broken heart and a contrite spirit, as reviving cordials for a fainting soul—of that they know absolutely nothing. But they have received the doctrines as they stand in the Word of God, or as they come from the mouths of ministers, without ever having had them, as the apostle James says, "grafted" into their hearts: "Receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:21). The truth has not entered nor grown into a wounded heart, as the grafted scion enters and grows into the wounded stock.

3. But again, "the full soul" may also represent one who is *full of presumption*. My friends, of all spiritual sins (that is, sins that a spirit may commit) I believe the child of God dreads most the sin of presumption. "Keep back Thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion

over me" (Ps. 19:13). And if God has let loose His wrath against one sin more than another in the Word, it has been against presumptuous transgressions. Now a man who has no fear of God in his heart, no spiritual apprehension in his soul of the greatness, majesty, justice, and holiness of Jehovah, if he should take up religion, must necessarily be presumptuous. Under the Levitical law, if anyone entered into the Holy Place, and still more into the most Holy Place, unless he were privileged, in the one case as a priest, and in the other as high priest once a year, he would be guilty of presumption, because he was not the person whom God had appointed to enter there. And thus if a man take hold of religion, and God do not by His Spirit lead him into it, his taking hold of and laying claim to the solemn truths God has revealed in His Word is an act of presumption. And the higher he soars into the truths revealed in God's Word without the Spirit's teaching him, the greater is his presumption, and the more daring intruder he is into the sanctuary of the Most High.

4. Again, "a full soul" is one who is *full of pride*. And what sort of pride? Not necessarily worldly pride, but what is commonly called spiritual or religious pride. Whenever presumption lodges in a man's mind, pride is sure to be its inseparable companion. A man who has had no soul humbling sight of God, no debasing view of himself, no feeling acquaintance with the depths of the fall, no insight into his own lost, ruined condition, and who therefore knows nothing experimentally of vital godliness, must needs be a proud man; for he has had nothing to break the neck of pride within him. Nay the more religious he is without divine teaching, the more proud he will be; and the more he is stiffened up with the form of godliness, while he denies the power thereof, the more will pride work, reign, and rule within his heart.

But we go on to consider what is said of this "full soul;" and may the Lord enable you to look into your consciences, and see whether you are the character or not.

"The full soul *loatheth an honeycomb.*" What is this honeycomb? Some may say, "It is Christ;" and doubtless in some sense it does signify Christ. But we may gather, I think, from another portion of God's Word something of what is meant by this honeycomb. The Psalmist, speaking of God's statutes, says, "Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb" (Ps. 19:10). By the honeycomb, then, I understand the Word of God dropping with power and sweetness into the soul; not Christ merely, but everything that God has revealed in His blessed Word connected with Christ, and flowing out of Christ, as experimentally made known to the conscience. Should we say that the honeycomb merely represents Christ, it might justly be said that there are "full souls" who do not loathe that honeycomb. Why, there are many persons, and there may be some such here, who would not give a rush to hear a sermon, "unless," say they, "it is full of Christ." But what do they know really and experimentally of Christ? Theirs is a doctrinal, a notional Christ. Christ in the letter of the Word they love to hear preached; because a mere doctrinal preaching of Him touches upon no rotten places within, exposes no hypocrisy, drags to light no secret presumption, brings no painful convictions to their mind. But Christ experimentally made known—the sweetness of God's truth distilled into the soul, the application of the Word with power, savour, dew, and unction, that the Spirit drops into the heart, just as the honey drops out of the full honeycomb—this, the very essence and marrow of vital godliness, "the full soul loatheth." Anything but application of God's Word to the soul by the Spirit, anything but power and savour, anything but

what touches the conscience and drops into the heart as the dew from heaven on the parched ground—anything but *that* for the "full soul." As many notions, as many doctrines, as many sentiments as you please; but the real work of the Holy Ghost upon the conscience, the vital teaching of "God unto profit," attended with melting power and a soul-dissolving effect—anything but *that*. "We leave *all that* to the poor groaners, the muck-worms, and corruptionists; that does not suit *us*—we want to hear about Christ." O what a dangerous, O what a subtle devil have we to contend with! He can use the very name of Christ, and the very doctrines of Christ, all the time that he is luring by them his deceived victims to their ruin. So that a man dead in a profession, with no more grace in his heart than Satan himself, can hear and can rejoice to hear Christ doctrinally preached. But when we speak of and insist upon a conscience touched with godly fear, and a heart melted and softened by the Spirit—when the hand is firmly put upon some rotten spot within, he writhes like a serpent which you suddenly trample on in your path. And thus the very things that God's people love, and the only thing that can satisfy them, "the honeycomb," and the sweetness of God's truth dropping into their hearts—the only things that can really profit, cheer, strengthen, and encourage the souls of the living family, are the very things that "the full soul loatheth."

But how much is contained in the word "*loatheth!*" It does not mean merely hate; it is something stronger than hatred; it implies a turning away from with abhorrence. The word "loathe" is sometimes applied to the feelings that God's people have of themselves, as in the passage, "Ye shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for all your evils that ye have committed" (Ezek. 20:43). When a man loathes himself, it is not merely that he hates himself; but that he looks upon himself as a vile, detestable wretch. We loathe

toads; some loathe spiders; we loathe filth. Loathing, then, not merely implies hating a thing, but hating it as a thing we cannot bear to look upon.

The "full soul," then, crammed with doctrines, sentiments, and notions, full of pride and presumption, "loatheth the honeycomb." When he hears, for instance, an experimental ministry, what is the effect of it upon him? His secret language is, "I cannot bear this; I hate to hear a parcel of feelings spoken of; such petty preaching, such preaching of self does not suit me." Thus the "full soul" turns away with hatred and contempt from the power of truth, and from the instrument through whose lips it comes. And whilst some of God's poor, needy people, are perhaps feeding on the truth dropping with sweetness into their souls, enmity, malice, wrath, hatred, and "all uncharitableness," as the Church of England service says, rise up in his heart.

II. But we pass on to consider the other side of the question; for it is by looking at a thing in two lights that we sometimes see it more clearly.

"But to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet." We have, then, a contrast here. We have seen the "full soul." We have been looking at him, analysing him, trying to pull off a few of the coverings from him, just peeping under the mask, and taking a glance at his features. Let us now look at the other side of the subject, and see what the "hungry soul" is.

We will begin with what the Lord Himself says upon this point: "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Mat. 5:6).

But what is implied by the expression "hunger"? When the Holy Ghost uses natural figures, it is that we may get a

spiritual meaning out of them. What then are the chief causes of hunger? *Hard labour* is one; *short commons* is another; and *long intervals* betwixt taking our food is a third. Take these three ideas into spiritual hunger—hard labour, short commons, and long intervals between refreshment—and, if you know these three things spiritually, I will say that you are a "hungry soul."

1. The first requisite, then, to hunger is *hard labour*. But what is spiritual labour? There is, first, a labouring under *the law*, when a man tries to be righteous in the sight of God; and that is something like a steep street not very far from this place called "Labour-in-vain Hill." There are many persons who have toiled and struggled up "Labour-in-vain Hill." And when they have about, as they thought, got to the top, they have slipped down to the bottom, and had to try to climb up it again. There is no more painful labour than to labour to establish our own righteousness. The labour of a porter at the docks is not to be compared for a moment to that of a soul labouring to work out its own righteousness. The hardest manual labour that a man can undergo is nothing compared to the labour of a poor soul to "do its duty," and to work out its salvation, that God may look upon it with satisfaction. And why so? Why, when the labourer at the end of the day looks at his work, he sees that he has *done* something. He has ploughed so many furrows; he has threshed so many bushels of corn; he has raised up so many bales by the crane; he has carried so many loads on his back. He has something to look at as done. But when the poor child of God, working at the law, looks at what he has done, he finds not only that he has done nothing, but that he has been undoing all that he had been trying to do. Instead of getting forward, he has only been going backward; and so he has not only lost all his labour, but at the end of the day he is further from the place for which he set out than he was

in the morning. No manual labour therefore can ever be compared to the labour of a soul trying to establish its own righteousness.

Again, there is *labouring under sharp and painful temptations*; and this is labour indeed. Labour naturally will bring the sweat to a man's brow; and labour spiritually will send the sweat through the pores of a man's skin. To have the devil tempting a man to all manner of infidelity, to all horrible blasphemy, all foul obscenity, all vile sensuality,—continually harassing the attention, and suggesting all manner of filthy abominations to a man's mind—this is labour; and if this does not force the sweat through a man's skin, not all the hard manual labour in the world can do it.

There is also a labouring *under trials and afflictions*, under burdens put upon a man's shoulders, under difficulty of circumstances, with a distressed family and children; all these things, when they come upon a man, make him labour. Talk of labouring for the good of others; talk of the labour of Bible societies and missionary societies—it is all play, compared to the labour of a soul exercised with afflictions and temptations.

2. But I hinted that there is another thing which makes a man very hungry, and that is short commons; when he could eat a good piece of a loaf, to have only just a quarter or an eighth of what he could consume. Short commons, then, will make and keep a man hungry; and I believe that God's people are, for the most part, kept on very short commons. They are not, for the most part, turned into rich pastures, where they can feed and lie down at ease; but they have a nibble here and a nibble there. Real spiritual blessings, depend upon it, my friends, are very rare. If you listen indeed to what people say at the doors of chapels and

elsewhere, you would think that God showered down blessings as thick as hail, or drops of rain in a thunderstorm. But you must not always attend to what people say at the doors of chapels—where one cries, "What a blessed man is this!" and another, "What a blessed man is that!" and a third, "What a precious sermon we have had to-day!" If you believed all this chit-chat, you would think that gospel blessings were rained down from on high; but God's true children know that they are very rare indeed. I have heard that a good man once said, "If he could get six crumbs in his life, and go to heaven at last, it was as much as he could expect." Not six *loaves*, mind you, but six *crumbs*. Now this man had been taught the difference between real blessings and mock blessings. And I believe when one comes to know the difference between nature and grace, between what God gives to man and what man steals for himself—when a man's eyes are thus opened to see and feel what are *real* blessings, he begins to feel how few they are. Why, there are some people who if they hear a minister preach, can carry away pretty well the whole of his sermon; can tell how it was divided, and how the subject was treated; and will go home chattering to everybody about it. While perhaps some of God's poor broken-hearted children all the time they were listening to it, had the devil pouring all manner of filth into their minds, and setting all sorts of worldly schemes before them. Or if they have just got a few words to touch their consciences, or a little drop of divine comfort in their hearts, they have to live upon it for weeks. Such is the difference between reality and imitation; such is the difference between what nature can furnish, and the real work of the Holy Ghost in the soul. Now, when you go home to-night, take—if the Lord shall enable you—a solemn review of how many times the Lord has blessed you in your lives—how many times you can solemnly say, "God blessed my soul at this time and at that;" and if you can count half a dozen conspicuous times

when God signally blessed your soul, and made it like a watered garden, you are a highly favoured man indeed. I do not mean to say that there may not have been sips and drops, a little nibble here and there, and that your soul may not have been sensibly encouraged and kept alive; but if you examine how many *conspicuous* blessings there were, and sum up the number of times that the God of Israel has visited, watered, comforted, and blessed your soul, I believe that, if God has made you honest, you will find the fingers of one or two hands will suffice to count them.

3. And this leads me to the *third* thing that makes a man hungry, and that is, *long intervals* between taking food—not five meals a day, breakfast, luncheon, dinner, tea, and supper. God's people are not like turtle-fed Aldermen, revelling and rioting on all the delicacies and luxuries of the season; but what they get is given at very long intervals; not merely scanty in quantity when it does come, but coming at great and distant intervals, so that if they are blessed—really blessed—once in six months, or once a year, they are well off.

These three things, then, working together make a "hungry soul." But to be a "hungry soul," a man must *want* something. The "full soul" wants nothing; he "loatheth a honeycomb." But the "hungry soul" wants something; and what is it that he wants? He wants *suitable food*. Take a hungry man naturally; give him a lump of clay, a piece of chalk, or a bit of wood. Can he eat it? No; however hungry he may be, it is not food for him. He wants something to nourish and support him, something to relieve his famished appetite. So it is spiritually. (I love to run the comparisons together, for out of them we can sometimes extract that spiritual nourishment which the soul requires.) If a man is hungry, would you give him ashes? If you do, they will not

feed him. There is a disease in the West Indies, which I have sometimes thought is applicable to many a spiritual sickness in England. It is called "dirt-eating;" and I will tell you what it is. The negro children, and sometimes the negro men, are afflicted with a depraved appetite; and this is continually craving after and feeding on dirt. The poor children are constantly found rolling in the dirt, and by stealth feeding upon it, and the filthiest offal they can procure. And what is the consequence? They gradually pine away and die; so that when this "dirt-eating" gets into a plantation (for the custom becomes infectious), the planter knows that unless it be stopped he will lose all the children. I think there is a good deal of this negro "dirt-eating" in the religious community—that is to say, there is a depraved appetite which loathes wholesome food, and which can feed upon everything and upon anything except the flesh and blood of God's dear Son. And what is the consequence? Why, these people must needs pine away and die. If they can feast upon offal, and eat husks and ashes; if they can feed upon anything short of the savoury flesh of the Lamb of God, they are nothing but "dirt-eaters;" and "dirt-eating" will bring them to eternal death. The children of God want nutritious food; they hunger after divine truth and consolation. Nutritious food is as needful for the "hungry soul" spiritually, as nutritious food is needful for the hungry body naturally.

But the text says, "to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet." What does that mean? Does it mean that the bitter thing is sweet *at the time* it is eaten? I cannot think that it does. But it is sweet *after* it is eaten. And the "hungry soul" so craves solid nutriment, that he can put up with a considerable measure of bitterness in his food, in order to get at the nutriment it contains. Some of us when very hungry may have had bitter bread set before us; yet we have eaten it, and we have found that the bitter bread did not disagree

with our stomachs; but after we had lost the bitterness on the palate we felt refreshed by the nutriment in it. But we could not but taste at the time the bitterness: the bread itself was not sweet, but the nutriment which we afterwards got out of it was so. As the apostle says, "No chastening *for the present* seemeth to be joyous but grievous; nevertheless *afterward* it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby." The bitter then is not converted into sweet, but there is a blessed nutriment in it which becomes sweet afterwards.

What bitter things, for instance, *temptations* are—temptations to unbelief, to blasphemy, to obscenity, and all the other base temptations of the devil—how bitter they are to a man's conscience, when made tender in God's fear! But then temptations, when they have passed away, have left a sweetness behind them; there has been a good resulting from them. They have brought the Christian out of the world; they have made him abhor himself; they have broken to pieces his former idols: they have made him to know himself to be a lost and ruined wretch before God. The man is glad he passed through them; he feels it sweet that he has been tempted, on account of the good he has got out of these exercises.

So of *afflictions, trials, and sorrows*; they are very bitter things. And they must needs be bitter, for God never meant that they should be otherwise. God does not deal with His children as an indulgent parent does with a spoiled child, when he just tips him with the end of the rod by a kind of make-believe, or perhaps strikes, in a fit of apparent indignation, the child's clothes, but takes good care not to hurt him. God does not play at make believe in this way. But when He takes the rod, it is to *make it felt*; and when He brings trouble on His children, it is that they may smart

under it. Our text therefore, does not, I believe, mean that the "bitter thing" is sweet when it is taken; for then it would cease to be bitter; but it is sweet on account of the blessed nourishment that is brought to the soul out of it. I remember reading many years ago the travels of Franklin to the North Pole; and a very interesting book it is naturally. But there is one incident mentioned in it which just strikes my mind. In wandering over the snows of the circumpolar regions, there was no food to be got for days, and I think weeks, except a lichen or kind of moss, that grew upon the rocks, and that was so exceedingly bitter (something like "Iceland moss") that it could only be taken with the greatest disgust; and yet upon that they lived. They had no alternative; they must either eat that or die. But that bitter moss became sweet after it had passed their palates; for it had a nutriment in it which kept their bodies alive. And thus many of God's people who have endured the most dreadful trials, have afterwards found nutriment to spring out of them. What bitter things are God's reproofs and rebukes in the conscience! And yet who would be without them? I appeal to you who fear God, whether you would deliberately choose never to experience marks of divine disapprobation, and never feel the frowns of God's anger every time that you go wrong? I believe in my conscience that you whose hearts are tender in God's fear would say, "Lord, let me have Thy frowns; for if I have not Thy frowns and a conscience to feel them, what sins should I not recklessly plunge into? Where would not my wicked nature carry me, if I had not Thy solemn reproofs!" These very rebukes then become sweet, not in themselves, nor at the time, but because of the solid profit that comes out of them.

And thus an experimental minister who pulls you down from your lofty tower, strips you and leaves you bare, and sends you home hanging down your head, and exclaiming, "O Lord,

look down upon me in Thy mercy!"—such a minister may say things that are felt at the time to be very bitter; but you will afterwards find that solid good has been produced. If I were to come to London to please even all God's people, I should have come in vain. I like to see people at times hanging down their heads, and crying to the Lord, "Am I right, or am I wrong?" I like to see some purpose effected, some hearts wounded, some secret device of Satan unmasked, that people may not go home buzzing and fluttering about like so many flies, but humbled and broken down, and if need be troubled; and that when they go to bed they may begin to roll about, and cry, "Search me, O Lord, and try me." I was at Bradford, in the north of England, a few weeks ago, and the Lord enabled me, I trust, to be a little faithful with the people there. They heard me with much attention; and I was not sorry to learn next morning that there had been among them some who had spent nearly a sleepless night. I think that was a better mark for them and for me too, than to see them flitting about on the wings of self-congratulation. It is a bitter thing, I know by experience, to roll backwards and forwards on one's bed in soul trouble and anxiety; but it is far better than to lay one's head comfortably upon the pillow, and say, "I care not what the man says; God has done this, and Christ has done that, and I am safe and secure," when the poor deluded creature has no work or witness of the Spirit in his soul. It is better to have an honest heart crying to the Lord with many groans, than to have one puffed up with self-pride and importance. To have one's religion all pulled to pieces, brought out of the secret depths of the heart, and exposed to the light of day, is a bitter thing; but you may depend upon it, that it is sweet in the end; for a man will find that there is a solid good in these dealings of God with his soul. He will find that there is a sweetness coming out of these very bitters; and thus, while "the full soul loatheth an honeycomb, to the hungry soul every bitter

thing is sweet."

Now, which are you? A "full soul" or "a hungry soul?" Do you loathe the honeycomb? Do you dislike experimental preaching? Do you hate to have your conscience with the fingers of the minister inside it? Do you hate to have your heart probed and searched, and all your religion torn to pieces? Oh! you may depend upon it that if you do, you are a "full soul." But if you are a "hungry soul," you "hunger and thirst after righteousness." If you hunger and thirst, you must experience painful want at times. There may be here many poor people—and it is the poor whom God has for the most part chosen to be rich in faith—there may be here many poor people, who know what it is to have a hungry belly. But does it not make you want food? So the hungry soul too has its wants. Yes, it is full of wants; and what it wants is something that God alone can supply. And the mercy is, that spiritual wants shall never be unrelieved: for the Lord has promised to feed the hungry with good things, whilst He sends the rich empty away.