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**Sermon preached by Mr F. L. Gosden at Galeed Chapel, Brighton
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Wilt Thou shew wonders to the dead? Shall the dead arise and praise Thee? Selah. Shall Thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave, or Thy faithfulness in destruction? Shall Thy wonders be known in the dark, and Thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? Psalm 88:10-12

It is a wonder in these modern days to find any who are willing to come and listen to such things as are in the text and in the hymns that we have just sung (1093, 299, 310). It becomes more and more amazing as the times become more and more corrupt and there is a superficial religion which has no root to it; but there will ever be a remnant taught of God.

I have found that Psalm to be as great, and I think more comfort and consolation to me, than any Psalm in the Bible. You may say, 'Why, more than the 103rd Psalm?' In a different way. I wonder if many of us could sing that last hymn from experience (310). This Psalm and the text get down to the very bottom of things. Sometimes you may be in such conflict of soul you would even like to get down to the very worst, and the very bottom; and David here speaks from his own experience. He was a man after God's own heart. He wrote the 51st blessed Psalm out of a broken and a contrite heart. He knew what sin was. He knew what the effect of sin is and was, not only in the world, but in his own heart, and in his own conscience.

This beautiful language, known by those under the inspiration of God, would express even that inward condition and conflict as is in this Psalm. "Free among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, whom Thou rememberest no more: and they are cut off from Thy hand. Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps" (Ps. 88 :5-6). Of course, we cannot expect all those who have a work of grace in their hearts to have been brought into such depths as this. Perhaps they never will be brought as low, but they will know it in measure.

Well, in the text we have depths. Dead, dead and buried, in darkness, and forgotten. But over against these conditions there are the divine perfections of God; there are His wonders, His lovingkindness, His divine faithfulness, His everlasting righteousness. There is the blessedness of the Psalm and of the text; but you must be brought, in a measure, into these depths, before you will need these divine perfections of God in Christ.

'Wilt Thou shew wonders to the dead?' There is more than one kind of death. The first death, from which really all other deaths ensue, was when Adam fell. "In the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:17). And another death is the experience when the sentence of death is in the heart by the Holy Ghost. Paul speaks of this: "I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died" (Rom. 7:9). There will be a corporeal death at last.

'Wilt Thou shew wonders to the dead?' Well, in every kind of death the Lord shows wonders of grace. Wonders are shown unto the dead in trespasses and sins, by the application of Christ in the Gospel. "And you hath He quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). There will be mighty wonders manifest in the resurrection day, when the Lord will show wonders to the dead, and those wonders will be the consequence of His own blessed resurrection – the wonders of the power of His resurrection. But to my mind the death in the text is neither of those. It is an experimental death that comes upon the child of God as he is being weaned, and David is speaking from his own experience. It is a very solemn experience for those that in the days of their youth rejoiced in the Lord, when

the candle of the Lord shined about their head, and when by His light they walked through darkness, and now are brought into the feeling of death in their souls.

He says "I am shut up and cannot come forth." "Thy fierce wrath goeth over me; Thy terrors have cut me off" (Ps. 88:8, 16). I don't know your cases here, but I thought when we were singing the hymn, it does set forth the degree of these experiences in the text.

*"Our staggering faith gives way to doubt;
Our courage yields to fear;
Shocked at the sight, we straight cry out,
'Can ever God dwell here?'*

And we are brought to know, in our deathliness, our helplessness, that we cannot keep alive our own souls. Good Hart expresses that:

*"None less than God's almighty Son
Can move such loads of sin;
The water from His side must run
To wash this dungeon clean."* (J Hart; Gadsby's 310)

It is experience – not notion, not logic.

'Wilt Thou shew wonders unto the dead?' It is in the way of a question, but, my friends, have you ever had to make it a prayer (I have, dozens of times) when all you have to bring to the Lord is your death, and this not at the commencement of experience. David here was a seasoned pilgrim, and to be overtaken by a sense of deadliness of soul, as in Ezekiel: "Our hope is lost; we are cut off for our part" (Ezek. 37:11)! Well, "pray without ceasing" (1 Thes. 5:17). It is the only remedy, and the Lord intends this by bringing His people into such conditions. "Wilt Thou shew wonders to the dead?" He told Ezekiel how He would do it. "Son of man ... prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord," and then He says "I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves" (Ezek. 37:4 & 12). Oh the blessedness of the Word of the living God! It gives sweet hope upon the borders of despair, my friends. You will bless God for the Holy Scripture.

'Wilt Thou shew wonders to the dead?' And the wonder that the dead want this resurrection. Paul prayed for it – "that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection" (Phil. 3:10). This experience brings us to an absolute extremity. You cannot get beyond bring dead; and therefore you will need everything that comes from God Himself - need the power of His resurrection, need Him to come where you are, need Him to ratify in your experience that blessed word "I am the resurrection, and the life" (John 11:25). He is the resurrection with respect to His people, from every kind of death, and every reviving of soul is immediately from the power of Christ's resurrection, and in consequence of union unto Him. Union to Christ is the secret of all life in the soul, and the secret of all maintenance of life and all restoration and reviving.

'Wilt Thou shew wonders to the dead? Shall the dead arise and praise Thee?' The thing is, his experience at the time is death - to find nothing living within, and yet he is a living man; the very cries in the Psalm indicate a living soul. Have you been brought there – wondered if you would ever rise again and praise the Lord? You forget prosperity; you almost forget what His presence is, what real communion is, what the sweetness of His presence is, almost forget what His divine voice is. You are in a state of death. But this is a prayer – a prayer of life in the experience of death.

‘Wilt Thou shew wonders to the dead? Shall the dead arise and praise Thee?’ Is it possible? Is it possible, Lord, that I shall ever pray again, ever hope again, ever sing again? Well, he knew that it needed wonders; therefore the eye of his faith was upon Him whose name is called Wonderful. Oh, it is great to look up from such a state of death to a living Christ! Faith will, but that would not alter his deathliness. It isn’t faith that can do it, and yet nothing will be done without faith. But it is He in whom faith believes, trusts, hopes.

‘Wilt Thou shew wonders to the dead? Shall the dead arise and praise Thee? Shall Thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave?’ To be in the grave is not something more than death, but to be dead and buried seems to be the end of the whole thing; and not only so, but in the grave there is corruption. I thought the hymn you have just sung is a better sermon on the text than I can preach - a beautiful hymn. As you remember that hymn, so you will *see* the corruption of the grave. But have you ever *felt* it? David knew it. He says “My loins are filled with a loathsome disease. My wounds stink and are corrupt because of my foolishness” (Ps. 38:7, 5), and that expressed what he felt within. And this is the point – not only dead, but corrupt. Real conviction of sin will bring us there, and sin thus will literally bring us to corruption in the grave. It is very solemn, very true. I have said before, and I say it because I believe it, that the actual body decomposing into corruption in the grave is not a *type* of sin, but the *actual effect* of sin itself. But oh, have you felt it spiritually in your soul, so that you have felt yourself to be a leper, incurable, and your very clothes abhor you (Job 8 v. 31)? We are saturated, impregnated with sin, my friends. I truly feel it; incurable we are. But oh, how it makes Christ precious – to see Him and the provision made in the Gospel – the very opposite! You cannot exaggerate; indeed, it is beyond human expression to define the nature, the malignity of sin; so it is beyond human expression to define the purity, the holiness, the glory of the dear Son of God, in whom is all the fulness of purity and holiness and righteousness, and it is there for such sinners as these, that as they are brought to realise that they are complete in its absolute form, in sin and death, in Him they can be complete in holiness and righteousness. “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though thy sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Is. 1:18). David pleaded that, when he felt this corruption in the grave of his nature, the grave of his corrupt heart; and some of you have felt it. And here is a prayer to take to the Lord, poor dead, corrupt things: ‘Wilt Thou shew wonders to the dead? Shall the dead arise and praise Thee? Shall Thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave?’

It is very wonderful and beautiful that, deep and low as was the Psalmist, yet upon every confession of his condition he brings forward a divine perfection, and that is a wonder. ‘Shall Thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave?’ It seems impossible, unlikely. If there was a great wonder to be shown and brought to Brighton, they would not take it up to the Brighton and Preston cemetery and display it among the tombs; they would take it to the living; and it is so unusual – seems so impossible – that the Psalmist says ‘Wilt Thou shew wonders to the dead?’ Oh, says the Lord, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Mk 2:17; Lk 5:32). There are no wonders shown to anybody *but* the dead! His lovingkindness is never declared to anybody but those who are brought to feel that they are in the grave of corruption.

What would you do without Him? Oh, blessed prayer, this. I have found more comfort in this Psalm than anywhere else. ‘Shall Thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave?’ Isaiah says “I will mention the lovingkindnesses of the Lord” (Is. 63:7). He said he would mention them, and you will never do anything more than *mention* them. They are so

innumerable, so great. Lovingkindness! It is different from His ordinary kindness. He causes this even to shine upon the just and upon the unjust (Mat. 5:45), the kindness of His providence that feeds all mankind. The Lord is kind to sinners – longsuffering kindness. But longsuffering kindness is different from lovingkindness, kindness with love in it; and it seems such an extreme opposite. ‘Shall Thy lovingkindness be declared’ in such a place as the grave of corruption?

Well, we must say again, opposites meet. “Such an High Priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners” (Heb. 7:26). Why does such a High Priest become us? Because we are just the opposite, and it brings in His blessed substitution. Oh the substitutionary nature of the work of the Lord Jesus! A consolation – a “strong consolation” (Heb. 6:18)! Therefore all His holiness, His righteousness, His infinite merit, His love, the wonders of His grace, are exercised toward the worst of sinners, is strong toward those that are weak, is wisdom to those that are ignorant.

‘Shall Thy lovingkindness be declared in the grave?’ It is a hopeless case to be not only dead but buried. Oh, but grace can reach that – and it will at last. These wonders will be shown to the dead, and this lovingkindness declared in the grave at last! We see this power in the fifth chapter of Romans: “That as sin has reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life” (v. 21). Oh that lovingkindness, the covenant love, the everlasting, immutable love of God in Christ! That lovingkindness is declared in the grave!

‘Or thy faithfulness in destruction?’ It is remarkable that the next Psalm, the 89th Psalm, speaks of the faithfulness and mercy in the covenant of grace. The very next Psalm answers, as it were, the text, ‘Wilt Thou shew wonders to the dead? Shall the dead arise and praise Thee?’ “I will sing of the mercies of the Lord for ever: with my mouth will I make known Thy faithfulness to all generations.” Upon what ground? “For I have said, Mercy shall be built up for ever; Thy faithfulness shalt Thou establish in the very heavens” (Ps. 89:1-2), and therefore this has reference to the covenant of grace. There is no death we come into, no corruption of our nature, not all the power of sin within, that can invalidate the covenant of grace, the purposes of God; and as He comes forth, the blessed Sun of Righteousness, “and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race” (Ps. 19:5), He goes forth to “destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8), and to establish the kingdom of righteousness in the hearts of His people.

‘Thy faithfulness in destruction’! Here is another condition of experience of soul destitution. “Thou turnest man to destruction” (Ps. 90:3), and that is in His wisdom as a God of judgment. It is a mercy to be turned to destruction. He will never destroy His own work, but He will destroy our work and the works of the devil, and sometimes you may feel that the whole of your religion is destroyed. Indeed, you will feel that you have destroyed yourself. I have felt that. Nobody else has destroyed you; nobody else can. Have you ever bowed before the Lord in your self-destruction?

He turns men to destruction, but discovers to them that they have destroyed themselves, and what sin has done in them. I cannot express what I feel in these verses, but in my little measure I have been brought before the Lord as this dead man, buried and self-destroyed. There is a kind of relief (some of you know it) in being able to bow at the footstool of mercy, and to have power to make your worst condition known, and you may understand this, that you have desired to make it as bad as possible – we want it to be as bad as it is. You want to be as dead as you really are, as corrupt as you are, as self-destroyed as you are, at the throne of grace. Those may be strong remarks – oh, but to empty oneself out in confession of sin at the throne of grace, to get to the very bottom - ‘Lord, I feel dead

and buried, and self-destroyed!’ But that is not all; over against this there are the wonders of His grace; there is the love, the immutable love of God; there is divine faithfulness – divine faithfulness in destruction. Well, one would conclude that faithfulness in sinners would destroy it, and therefore this is the exclamation: ‘Is it possible, Lord, for Thy faithfulness in destruction to be saving?’ It is a wonderful scripture to me: “a just God and a Saviour” (Is. 45:21) and when we come to consider who is to be saved, and the depth of the fall, we could almost understand better if it should say ‘a just God and a destroyer’! But where shall we find the interpretation? Why, in that one blessed Person. You find it all in Him. “Him hath God exalted to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance unto Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5 v. 31). It will make Christ great, salvation great.

‘Thy faithfulness in destruction’ – and this faithfulness in destruction can only be in a way of salvation, because Christ has been faithful to the law in fulfilling it, because He has rendered infinite satisfaction unto God, vindicated His holiness and character of almighty God in His Person and in His work, and this faithfulness is upon the side of a sinner. I speak carefully, but, my friends, if the Lord did not save those for whom He died, He would be unfaithful to Himself, unfaithful to the covenant of grace. Immutable and divine faithfulness constituted a Rock, upon which if a poor sinner builds, he will be safe through all the storms of life, and find in the Lord Jesus, in His divine faithfulness, a refuge, a hiding-place. This faithfulness has in it His precious blood, and the covenant of grace involves the whole work of the Lord Jesus. In the covenant of grace the Lord Jesus was raised up, appointed to the office that He should sustain, as well as the work that He was to do; and this faithfulness of God involves that covenant. The covenant is an oath. It is a promise, and it is an oath *and* promise, with all that is necessary to carry it out to sinners; therefore

*“Sinners can say, and none but they,
‘How precious is the Saviour!’”*

(J Hart; Gadsby’s 806)

‘Thy faithfulness in destruction? Shall thy wonders be known in the dark?’ Darkness - as we said, this is experience subsequent to the new birth. “Who is among you that feareth the Lord ... that walketh in darkness, and hath no light” (Is. 50:10)? Can He ‘shew wonders in the dark’? He delighteth to do it! Why, to show wonders in those extraordinary, impossible cases magnifies His wisdom, His power, His grace, His salvation. He delights in these impossibilities. He delights to show wonders to the dead. He delights to show lovingkindness in the grave, and faithfulness in destruction! The worse the case, the more He is honoured. I wonder how many here know something of those conditions, this darkness.

‘Shall Thy wonders be known in the dark?’ One of the wonders that He declares in darkness is this: He bringeth the blind by a way they know not, and leadeth them in paths that they have not known, makes crooked things straight before them, and rough places plain (Is. 42:16; 40:4). When He does that, and you are walking in darkness, you will be able to stay yourself upon God, and that is what it is for. If we never knew anything of this death and of our corruption, if we never knew how continually we are destroying ourselves, if we never walked in darkness, what exercise of soul would there be, what knowledge of God? This is how we know Him. How do we know that His name is called Wonderful, if we have never had a case to need wonders wrought and shown? How do we know that His lovingkindness is strong, and He changes not in His lovingkindness –

“His lovingkindness, O how great!”

(S Medley; Gadsby’s 9)

- if we have never been in a position where nothing but free, unmerited love and mercy can reach us? 'Shall Thy wonders be known in the dark?' Well, it is a mercy that these cases and conditions are taken up in the Word of God.

'And Thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness.' This forgetfulness may have two renderings. One, our forgetfulness of God, and on the other hand, God's apparent forgetfulness of us. "Wherefore dost Thou forget us for ever, and forsake us so long time?" (Lam. 5:20) said Jeremiah in his Lamentations, those sweet Lamentations which breathe of a living soul. 'Thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness.' If you take it with respect to the forgetfulness of His people ("My people have forgotten Me days without number" (Jer. 2:32)) we forget Him when things are easy, when we need not His wisdom to direct us, when we can manage very well for ourselves, when there is nothing awry, when we are strong; then we forget Him and become independent of Him. What a mercy then it is to be brought into darkness and into a feeling of death in ourselves! How it did awaken the Psalmist!

There is something about this death that is a living death, full of exercise, full of anxiety, full of prayer, full of faith. That is the wonder of it. The man here was in the exercise of faith; see him struggling! It is precious to trace this faith through the Word of God, but more so in our own experience.

'And Thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness.' Well, should there be a poor tried soul who feels dead and buried and self-destroyed and walking in darkness, who feels the Lord has forsaken him, make the text a prayer. If you make the text a prayer, you will enter into the next Psalm: "I will sing of the mercies of the Lord for ever," for that is how we must live; that is the way to heaven.

Amen.