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Sermon preach at Ebenezer, Clapham by Mr.J.Delves  
on Wednesday evening, 28th November, 1956

Text: 1 Peter 4, vv 18 & 19

"And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to Him in well-doing, as unto a faithful Creator."

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Peter's two epistles abound with many very timely, pertinent exhortations to the people of God under a condition of suffering, which seems to be referred to by the "fiery trial" of which the apostle would remind them, that they were not to think it strange concerning this; assuring them that it would be a means wherein they would be partakers of Christ in His sufferings, and would eventually be made glad with exceeding joy when His glory should be revealed.

It is noticeable that although Peter and Paul, under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, both refer to the Lord Jesus Christ as an example in suffering, in the first verse of this chapter Peter says, "Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind:" he would have them, by divine grace, fortify themselves in the light of this, arm yourselves with the gospel armour, by God's grace, that they might thereby be enabled to hold fast and endure unto the end. The apostle Paul, writing to the Hebrews, said "For consider Him that endured such contradiction of sinners against Himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds." Are not the Lord's people often wearied and faint in their minds? But this appears to be just the very time to arm themselves afresh, to put on the gospel armour, to "fight the good fight of faith and lay hold on eternal life." I believe it can be said that nothing can be more strengthening than a view of the great Redeemer in His sufferings, when a child of God is passing through the valley of tribulation in his own experience, or in his circumstances. It can greatly tend to strengthen faith, which may sometimes be so weak as to seem to be just ebbing out; it can help us, by God's grace, to hold fast, because the more steadfast the eye, the stronger is faith, and the more closely we keep our eyes upon Him, the less, proportionately, do we observe the difficulties and things which in themselves may tend almost, if not quite, to overwhelm us. There can then, surely, be no better way of enduring, holding fast, continuing, and eventually overcoming, than by keeping a steadfast eye fixed on Christ alone, following Him, putting our trust in Him and committing our way unto Him. After all, what a wonderful mercy it is, for a poor,

trembling sinner to get a sight of Christ, especially (though it must be in a very small way) in his sufferings! How light ours may be as in comparison with His! Moreover we can, I trust, sometimes feelingly believe that "our light affliction, which is but for a moment," will thus work "for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

The apostle says here, "For He that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin". It may be a little difficult to ascertain whether the apostle refers here to the Lord Jesus Himself or to His suffering people. No doubt it may be so considered that the dear Redeemer has by suffering death, ceased from sin, not of course - God forbid - the committing of sin, but He has ceased from sin in that sense, that He has borne it away, removed the curse of it; He no longer suffers on account of sin being laid upon Him as the Surety of all His people. But it appears more obvious that the apostle Peter refers to the Lord's suffering people; "For he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin; That he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God." That is to say, those who were called upon to suffer death for the dear Redeemer's sake have ceased from sin, they have ceased from the very being of sin, as pertaining to them in any sense whatever. They have ceased also from the committing of sin any further, for they are removed from it entirely and completely. Moreover, they have ceased from the workings of sin within them which, more or less, attend the Lord's people while they are here, in their earthly pilgrimage. But the apostle's great point in the chapter, as relating to suffering, is to point out that it is to suffer according to the will of God, as they have grace to esteem it an honour that they may so be called to suffer and it is here a particular privilege, under those sufferings of such a nature, to "commit the keeping of their souls to Him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator."

The apostle Peter may refer to the destruction of Jerusalem as the hand of God in divine judgment upon the Jews, for their unbelief and rejection of the Messiah - "For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?" Divine judgment, in relation to the Lord's people, is not to be considered as in wrath, or penal, but as divine chastening, for the purifying of them and the strengthening of their faith, trust and confidence in Him. "And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?"

What are we to understand then, by the apostle writing thus of the Lord's people, that they are, as it is said here, "scarcely saved?" "If the righteous scarcely be saved." We are not to understand that there is any deficiency, any lack, weakness, fault or failing, in God's great salvation, in itself - God forbid. The work of the great Redeemer on behalf of His dear people was a perfect work in every part thereof, absolutely! It could not have been more perfect or more perfectly accomplished; there was no fault or failing there. His obedience to the divine law was a perfect obedience. His substitution, His standing in the place of His dear people, was a perfect substitution, absolutely. I believe from the bottom of my heart that every sin, the sin of every one for whom the dear Saviour said, "It is finished", was borne away, and the curse from it removed, completely. Moreover His all-prevailing mediation in heaven is a perfect mediation. "He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him." No failure is possible there. His very presence in heaven as the great High Priest of His people, ensures, without possible ultimate failure, the presence there one day of every one, without exception, for whom He shed His precious blood, observed the divine law, and suffered its terrible penalty. This then, is an all-important point, to preserve us from any views that may not be consistent with divine revelation; we are not to conclude that there might have been some weakness there; yet still the truth applies, in relation to the salvation of the Lord's dear people, that they are "scarcely saved." The apostle's meaning here is, evidently, that the Lord's people are saved with difficulty; that is to say, that their salvation, although in itself a perfect accomplishment, absolutely - yet still, experimentally, is attended with great difficulty, with much trial and affliction, so that they may sometimes feel and fear they will never endure or hold fast unto the end. It may seem sometimes almost impossible that it can so be. Indeed, it will be a wonder of wonders if we are, after all, brought through eventually and safely landed; it must be under great difficulties.

The people here thus to be saved, are observed as to their character; they are said to be "righteous". "If the righteous scarcely be saved". These people are contrasted with the wicked and ungodly. "If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" It is as though he would say to these suffering believers, if your salvation is attended with such apparently insurmountable difficulties, and yet if after all, you are brought through and given an abundant entrance, what will the end be of the ungodly, the sinner,

the wicked, those who live and die in darkness, in their sins, in unbelief, and receive a just and eternal reward of their deeds? What will their end be? The people defined here in the first part as being scarcely saved, are the righteous. Indeed, no one else will be saved but the righteous, for although in so-called Christianity there are many denominations, creeds, beliefs and so on, after all it comes down just to this - there is a people to be saved, and a people who will be left. Many Scriptures show that those who will, by the mercy of God, be saved with an everlasting salvation, are the righteous. In what sense can they so be considered? In deed these very people feel themselves to be full of unrighteousness and would be the first to confess that their "righteousness is but as filthy rags" and of no value whatever; they feel more of their sin and wretchedness than anyone else does - and yet they are righteous people. A righteous person may be defined in the first place, as one whose life, walk, and character are beyond reproach, and this particularly under conditions of life which may be a great test to such a commendable deportment. So it appears to have been with David in his sufferings under the persecutions of Saul, for we find David saying, "The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness, and according to the cleanness of my hands in His eyesight." It may appear as though David was inclined to flatter himself a little there, as though praising his own good character, but I do not believe David meant anything of the kind. I believe it was a humble acknowledgement that the Lord rewarded him, in view of the fact that he, David, by God's grace was enabled to walk uprightly under Saul's envy, bitterness and persecution, and not retaliate, although he had opportunity so to do. For his commendable conduct there, the Lord rewarded him, commended him and eventually raised him to the kingship.

There is another sense in which a righteous person may be defined, and that is as one who walks in the ordinances of the Lord or the precepts of the gospel, by His grace, and in conformity with divine teaching. We read of Zacharias and Elisabeth that "they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." We are not to understand by this that they were perfect in the flesh - no one is - but they were without fault in the ceremonies of the Jews, according to the Lord's appointment of them, under the legal dispensation. They were, by God's grace and teaching, enabled to walk in the precepts of the gospel uprightly and worthily in that vocation to which they were called by His grace. As possessing grace, walking in His ways and keeping His commandments, we may so be said to be righteous. But a true feature of a righteous

person stands in his union with the Lord Jesus Christ, as being washed in His blood and clothed in His righteousness, which seems to be so beautifully set forth in the prophecy of Zechariah; he saw one "clothed with filthy garments" of whom it was said, "Take away the filthy garments from him" and to him, "I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment." The obedience the Saviour wrought in the days of His flesh, is imputed in a saving way to every one for whom He shed His blood, and all, in that sense, are righteous. It is a mercy then, when favoured to feel we are thus enabled (although we all may feel to come so short, sadly short) to "adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things."

But what are we to understand by being "scarcely saved"? All these dear people to whom the apostle Peter refers, and all the Lord's people are "scarcely saved" in this sense, that their salvation is attended with great difficulties and bitter opposition. The salvation of the Lord's people is a great salvation. The appointment of them unto this was a great appointment. The price paid for them is a great price. The blessings they enjoy in consequence of this, are great blessings. No other people are so favoured as they, although, it may be, none so tried; but in this view, we may, perhaps, refer with all reverence, to the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Mr. Hart, referring to the Redeemer in His sufferings in Gethsemane, says, He

"Bore all incarnate God could bear  
With strength enough and none to spare."

It was in this light, in the face of tremendous difficulties, that the dear Redeemer was helped through that inconceivably trying ordeal in Gethsemane. It must have been so, because as man He suffered. Moreover we read of Him in His prayer, saying, "O My Father, if this cup may not pass from Me, except I drink it, Thy will be done." I know we cannot understand much of this, but here it is. Not only so, but the apostle Paul refers to His "Strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death", and that He was heard "in that He feared". As a man then, we may say it was with great difficulty, in view of the intolerable load of imputed sin that was laid upon Him, that the dear Redeemer did complete His work. We find it in the prophecy of Isaiah, "For the Lord God will help Me; therefore shall I not be confounded: therefore have I set My face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed." He was helped to prove that, and did He not often pray unto this end? What a wonderful mercy this was for you and me, for here we can look upon a perfect and complete redemption being given, absolutely complete! But O, when we think of the price He had to pay, the sufferings He had

to endure, the burdens He had to bear, it was, we must conclude, with great difficulty that the work was accomplished.

But this word does not actually refer to the dear Redeemer; it refers to His people, "If the righteous scarcely be saved." The point then, experimentally viewed that has to be proved is that our salvation will be, and is, attended with great difficulty - that is to say there is so much in connection therewith, that is hard to contend with, almost impossible to us, and would be entirely impossible, were we left to our own strength; we should soon fail and faint and give up, if we were not divinely supported with fresh supplies of God's grace. This is what the Lord said to His servant Jeremiah, "If thou hast run with the footmen, and they have wearied thee, then how canst thou contend with horses? and if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst, they wearied thee, then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?" It is as though He would say, If you have not strength to hold on now, under present trials that press heavily upon you, how will you do when heavier ones come? If, in life, you cannot hold on, how will you do in death? But it is the mercy of the Lord's dear people to prove divine sufficiency both in life and in death. Sometimes it may seem almost impossible that we shall eventually be overcomers and come forth of them all. Job said, "I am escaped with the skin of my teeth," a proverbial expression which shows that he had escaped by only a very narrow margin; so it may be said to be with the Lord's people. The apostle Paul writing to the Corinthians speaks of "having the sentence of death", of being in circumstances where they "were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired of life." Even so, the Lord appeared and delivered from the death which seemed imminent. "But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that He will yet deliver us."

"If the righteous scarcely be saved." Our salvation - that is to say, the road to heaven, that narrow way that leads to eternal life, is attended with continual difficulty and opposition. It has to be a battling against wind and tide, more or less, all the time; against flesh and blood, against infidelity within, against a tempting devil, sometimes against mysterious, conflicting circumstances, in the face of much difficulty then; yet, after all, what a mercy it will be to be brought through to overcome at last, as undoubtedly every true vessel of mercy will. The point here may be unto this end - that it will be a wonder of wonders if it is so with us. If the righteous scarcely be

saved, if we are brought through after all, when we have sometimes seemed to be so near despair, fainting, falling, so assailed by opposite things, so dark, so tempted, feeling to have so little grace and so much sin, it will be a wonder if we come through - after all - if we are found right at last - if we escape the wrath to come.

"And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" The Psalmist says, "The ungodly shall not stand in the judgment." "They are like the chaff which the wind driveth away." The apostle Peter says, The heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men." The wrath of God will, evidently, one day be poured out upon the wicked, the ungodly, to their eternal doom and banishment to the bottomless pit.

"Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God".

This suffering then is defined in a particular way and has respect to the righteous, for there is nothing in the Scripture to suggest immunity from suffering, and the apostle Peter's epistles seem to have a particular bearing upon this point. They were a suffering people - possibly many of them had suffered the loss of their homes; they were scattered abroad, many put to cruel deaths - possibly by fire, to which the apostle refers when he speaks of "the fiery trial" which was to try them. It may be some had death before them for the Lord's sake. This is evidently what the apostle refers to here with regard to suffering. "Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God." It may be noticed in the chapter that he defines the difference - "Let none of you suffer..... as an evildoer" and so on. He defines the difference between suffering as the result of our folly and sin - and suffering for the Lord's sake. This is so in several different places. "If ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye." "If ye be reproached for the Name of Christ, happy are ye; for the Spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you." Moreover he speaks of suffering, that "It is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well-doing, than for evil doing." There are sufferings then that are peculiar to the Lord's redeemed family, that the world does not know, and there are sufferings common to all but which are yet according to the will of God. All suffering, indeed, results from sin, because before the fall there was no suffering. Where there is no sin there is no suffering, so all suffering is consequent upon sin in this aspect; but the Lord's people suffer in a different way from others. They suffer by reason of the working of sin and the conflict they feel within, which brings a wretchedness, and makes them feel sometimes like

the apostle Paul when he said, "O wretched man that I am." Yet that is a healthy suffering, a suffering of a spiritual nature arising from divine life in the soul. There are two armies within, each at war with the other, and this occasions suffering. But there may also be suffering by reason of persecution and opposition from without, suffering by reason of different trials and afflictions, that may be laid upon us in the purposes of God, suffering in our bodies, in our circumstances, or in different ways that divine providence has appointed unto us, not on account of any particular sin, but for a particular purpose, none the less, and as considered so to be necessary in the councils of God. Some of this may be very mysterious and most conflicting to natural reason. It was so in relation to Joseph who had to suffer as he did, be thrown into prison and so on, but all was according to the will of God, with an end in view. So with David's sufferings and Job's sufferings but all had a wonderful issue in the purposes of God.

There is a very timely and fitting word here, for all who may be in a path of suffering according to divine appointment unto them. It may involve some peculiar, particular trial that divine providence has ordered, or may consist in something before you in your circumstances of life which occasions great anxiety and often fills you with many fears, so that you wonder how you will be able to face it or hold on. Here is a wonderful word to you. Let all such "commit the keeping of their souls to Him, (that is to the Lord) in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator." The keeping of their souls, that is, that such, by His grace wait upon Him, seek unto Him, put their trust in Him, and pray to be preserved and held up, and brought through. This consists in casting our care upon Him, committing it to Him. Have you difficulty before you? Have you a burden pressing upon you? Have you some peculiarly strange trial in your path? Commit it to the Lord. This is the precept here; you can never do wrong in this. You will never make a mistake by committing it to Him. What is the promise? "As thy days, so shall thy strength be." As I was going to Brighton I called on a friend in the motor trade, whose circumstances may be much affected by the present situation. I said, What will you do? He said, I have to live a day at a time. That was a wonderful answer and seems to imply what this committing to the Lord is, living a day at a time. Does it belong to us to say, What shall I do with this or what will the outcome of something else be? What does the Lord say? "As thy days, so shall thy strength be."

May the Lord help us then and may we be (notwithstanding all our fears, weaknesses and faintings), among those eternally and completely saved, although to us it may seem almost impossible that it can be!

Amen.