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Sermon preached by Mr. J. Delves at "Ebenezer" Clapham on Sunday  
morning 14.1.73

Hymns: 277, 1113, 698

73/A

Reading: John 11 (11-45)

Text: Isaiah 61.3

"To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness".

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Most of you will remember that I have been speaking on this subject last Sabbath day, and last Wednesday evening, from the two preceding verses, and I have felt it rather noticeable that verses 2 and 3 have particular respect to those who mourn. It is It is said "To comfort all that mourn", not merely leave them to their sadness and sorrow, grief, distress or loss, but to comfort them. "To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness". I have felt that this can be suitable under our present loss and so I have ventured to read it.

As you all know, loss by death brings grief, sadness and sorrow, wherever there is a natural or spiritual affection. Where there is merely natural affection it applies to that which is natural in affection, in family ties, but where there is a spiritual mourning it incorporates a number of things that press upon the hearts of the Lord's people in these dark and solemn times. But as you can see, the main point is that blessings are appointed unto them that mourn in Zion. These are Zion's mourners, they mourn in Zion, they mourn about matters that worldly people have no concern about whatever, although in some aspects there is a similar cause; but actually the cause of all mourning has its rise in the fall of man, and the entrance of sin into this world. Ever since sin entered into the world there has been trouble distress, grief, sin, wickedness, and many, many things that have been an occasion of mourning. This is noticeable even in the case of Isaac. We read of him that, after Rebecca in the Lord's providence was brought to him, he was comforted after his mother's death. He mourned the loss of his

mother undoubtedly, and so right the way through the ages that have followed there have been times of mourning, often under bereavement and loss such as is upon us now, and particularly upon our dear friend and the family. So Ruth, who evidently had passed through much grief and sorrow, when Boaz showed such kindness to her, said, "Let me find favour in thy sight, my lord; for that thou hast comforted me, and for that thou hast spoken friendly unto thine handmaid". There is something particular about this is there not? It is said also of Job that, after all he passed through in his grief, affliction, and distress of mind and body, when the Lord appeared to him and delivered him all his brothers and sisters came to him and comforted him. In the 23rd. Psalm we find David saying, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me".

Here is comfort then; the comfort that the Lord's people are really favoured to feel in times of need, and this is the Gospel. Friends may comfort others in their losses; and this can be very timely and helpful as far as it can go; but in the case of the Lord's dear people there is a Comforter and a comfort that rises above all that one may endeavour to bestow on another. We find the Lord Jesus saying, "I will not leave you comfortless; I will come to you". In times then of sadness, sorrow and loss there is comfort for the Lord's living family. There is also comfort from the Holy Scriptures. There is comfort from the promises of the Scriptures. As you know they abound with many promises, many very blessed promises, and the fact that they are recorded is a comfort; they are recorded for that purpose, but when a promise is applied with some power and efficacy, it brings a sweet comfort into the heart. So we find the Lord comforting those troubled disciples, He said to them, "Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." When that is sweetly felt in the heart, what a comfort it is to the Lord's dear people, (and I trust we can feel this of our departed

friend) the comfort felt in the promises of the precious Gospel. I have a word or two to say about this later. Now the prospect that lies before the Lord's people is at times a great comfort to them, as I have mentioned, and as the Apostle John records: "It doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is". There is a comfort where a good hope through grace can be felt in the hearts of the Lord's people under conditions of loss, grief, sorrow and mourning. Was it not so in the case of Martha and Mary? They were deeply grieved by the loss of their brother, and it must have been a trial of faith to them that their Lord Whom they loved was so long in coming to them, because they felt He could have saved his life. But the Lord delayed His coming for a particular purpose, even to perform a greater miracle than healing a sick person, He delayed His coming to be a witness and proof of His divine power to raise the dead, as He did on more occasions than one.

"To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion". With the Lord's people there are particular matters that cause mourning and one of these is sin. A hymnwriter says,

"Dear Lord, may I a mourner be,  
Over my sins and after thee"

This is a gracious exercise felt in the heart more particularly and more acutely when one can feel a hope that his sins are forgiven through the wounds and blood of an incarnate God, when pardon is in some measure felt under a view of a suffering Saviour; then sin becomes exceedingly sinful and is a cause of mourning. I feel I might say that we should be in a more lively condition if there was more mourning over sin, that is inward mourning, grief of heart, grief for grieving Him. As one says,

"'Tis not the fear of hell alone,  
For that may prove extreme;  
Repenting saints the Saviour own  
And grieve for grieving him".

Here is a cause of mourning then, but blessings are appointed for

those who mourn over sins. And what kind of blessing is this? It is the promise of pardon and forgiveness as recorded in the Scriptures in many places and in this same prophecy too, "Comfort ye comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins". When that comes into the heart a little it brings a sweet comfort, in fact it can turn the mourning into joy as we read in Jeremiah, "I will turn their mourning into joy, and will comfort them" and "they shall flow together to the goodness of the Lord, for wheat, and for wine, and for oil, and for the young of the flock and of the herd: and their soul shall be as a watered garden; and they shall not sorrow any more at all". What an amazing mercy it is that the God of heaven is a sin-pardoning God. He has declared Himself to be this. "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage; he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy". Here is sweet comfort appointed unto them. It is appointed unto them that mourn in Zion. This immense blessing of pardon through the Lamb's redeeming precious blood is appointed unto the Lord's mourning ones, "To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion".

These are Zion's mourners then, but there are other causes of mourning. We mourn the state and condition of our country, what is taking place and how we seem to be drifting further and further away from God, drifting down the stream as it appears to us. Iniquity runs down our streets, it is a sad day of mourning to some of us that our beloved land is in such a state as this, it is a cause of mourning with those that are in Zion. Zion's mourners also mourn because of the low state of Zion, few come to her solemn feasts; places of worship have comparatively few attending them; Sabbath breaking is everywhere apparent. Men have no fear of God before their eyes, this is a sadness to the living family of God!

But there are other causes of mourning, and that is when losses come, when bereavement comes, when those we have loved are taken,

when we lose our parents, as a number of us have done. In some cases they have long since departed, but at the time, in most cases, and especially where they were godly parents, their loss brings grief and sadness. Even in relation to the Lord Himself we read that He wept at the grave of Lazarus. What a grief and sorrow death brings when as in some cases those that we feel can be ill spared are suddenly taken from us; but all our times are in His hand. In this particular we would express our sympathies with our dear friend and member here in her loss, and other members of the family that may be so affected. It is a loss, and we pray that she may be very graciously comforted even as we read here, "To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion". We believe she can feel, and we also feel, that we sorrow not even as others of whom there is no hope. What a comfort it is when this can be felt as I feel it is; therefore we sorrow not even as others which have no hope. But even so, when the parting comes it brings grief and sorrow more or less. It seems that it is intended that it should be so, for the cause of death is sin, the sting of death is sin. If there had been no sin there would have been no death. Death/<sup>was</sup> pronounced upon our first parents because of their sin, and this is the sting, in itself it brings pain to mind and body, which is often felt by those ready to depart. "The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." This is a source of comfort then, of sweet comfort too as we can believe that the Lord Jesus gained the victory over death by dying. He laid down His own life, conquered death and rose again triumphantly so that death had no control over Him to hold Him in the grave longer than was appointed.

"To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes". Ashes as you know are what remains of fuel after a fire, all you see is the ashes, they tell you there has been a fire, things have been burned up. Ashes, literally are not pleasant things to look upon, but ashes in the Scriptures indicate grief and sometimes great grief and bitterness of heart. It was the custom in Bible times to give expression to grief and

distress of mind by putting ashes on the head, sackcloth with ashes; this was practised in many cases that we read of in the Scriptures. It also indicates being brought down before God to feel that we have nothing of our own but sin and ruin and death. These are the ashes; but according to the Scriptures here it is the Lord's appointment to give unto them beauty for ashes. What beauty is this? If we take the case of the prophet in Isaiah we find him making this confession after what he had seen, "Woe is me for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." This brought him down to be like unto dust and ashes, as Abraham felt when he said, "Behold, now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which are but dust and ashes". How can anything attractive arise from this? When poor sin-convicted people feel they are brought to this condition of grief and sorrow for sin, who have had things burned up, a lot of their religion burned up, almost everything burned up, so as to have nothing but a few ashes how can beauty rise out of this? It is in this same chapter, when one of the seraphims came to the prophet with a live coal in his hand taken from off the altar, and laying it upon his mouth, saying "thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged". This was the beauty for ashes; the beauty here is in the Lord's loving-kindness and mercy in forgiveness. So it is in the hymn, "Jesus, thy blood and righteousness  
My beauty are, my glorious dress".

"Beauty for ashes" and "the oil of joy for mourning".

By the oil of joy we may understand the blessings of the Gospel in their saving effect upon the heart when there is some application of them to a mourner in Zion, as it is recorded in Jeremias "They shall flow together to the goodness of the Lord, for wheat, and for wine and for oil, and for the young of the flock and of the herd: and their soul shall be as a watered garden; and they shall not sorrow any more at all". This is the oil of joy for mourning. In reverting to beauty for ashes my mind goes to the case of Joshua, of whom we read in the prophecy by Zechariah, when he was before the angel, clothed in filthy garments, in a sad condition indeed. Here are the ashes then; he is clothed in filthy garments. But where does the beauty come in? It comes in what was said to him, "Take away the

filthy garments from him. And unto him he said, Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment. And I said, Let them set a fair mitre upon his head". This beauty for ashes then is the righteousness of Christ imputed as a robe of righteousness. It was beauty for ashes in the case of the prodigal when he returned to his father and confessed that he was not worthy to be called his son; but his father said "Bring forth the best robe and put it on him". This was beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning ".

This oil of joy is the sweet saving effect of the Gospel, of a word, a promise felt, something coming in bringing a sweet softening. This is the oil of joy. Oil was and still is used extensively in eastern lands. The oil of joy for Zion's mourners is the joy of the blessed Gospel, those good tidings, the joyful sound of the Gospel particularly when the Spirit of the Lord brings it in, makes it sweet and applies the promise with saving efficacy. How soon the Lord can turn our mourning into joy! There is a great difference in the Lord's dear people, some of them may have an inward experience that may not be much known before others, and yet they walk before the Lord, they are so to speak the Lord's quiet ones. It is recorded in Malachi, "They that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name." This has been a comfort to our dear friend and member, Leah, and so it has to myself. I feel that although our departed friend may not have felt able to say much to other people about herself, yet even so there is hope that she was one of these who thought upon His name. I have got several things relating to our departed friend, and I would like to mention three of them just now, and the rest tomorrow morning at the funeral. Leah says it seems that her grandfather told her mother that one's spiritual experience is personal and it is best to keep silent about it. "When my mother was ill in 1970 and prior to her being taken into hospital, she kept repeating the text, 'I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Tearing off a Scripture from the block calendar she read, "Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God". Evidently these Scriptures rested upon her mind, and especially the persuasion that nothing is able to separate from the love of God. There was another verse which she would repeat sometimes, "The Lord is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever." Where there is a hope raised up in the heart, where there is a gracious, prayerful thinking upon His name, where there is a secret exercise (as there is in many where perhaps it may not come out very much), are they not among the Lord's silent ones. And though we would have liked to have heard some good things from our departed friend, it is evident that she was of those who thought upon His Name. I have often thought of those words in Malachi, "A book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name", and we feel that this applies to our departed friend. Here we leave it, we are not the judges in this sense of one's destiny, but we feel and have the comfort in this evidence of her own heart's exercise, therefore we can say of one now taken from us, "We sorrow not as those that have no hope". May the Lord look upon each one here, for this death is a warning to everyone of us. It is a solemn word, "Be ye also ready". O may that real preparation be granted unto us and then it will be well. Amen.